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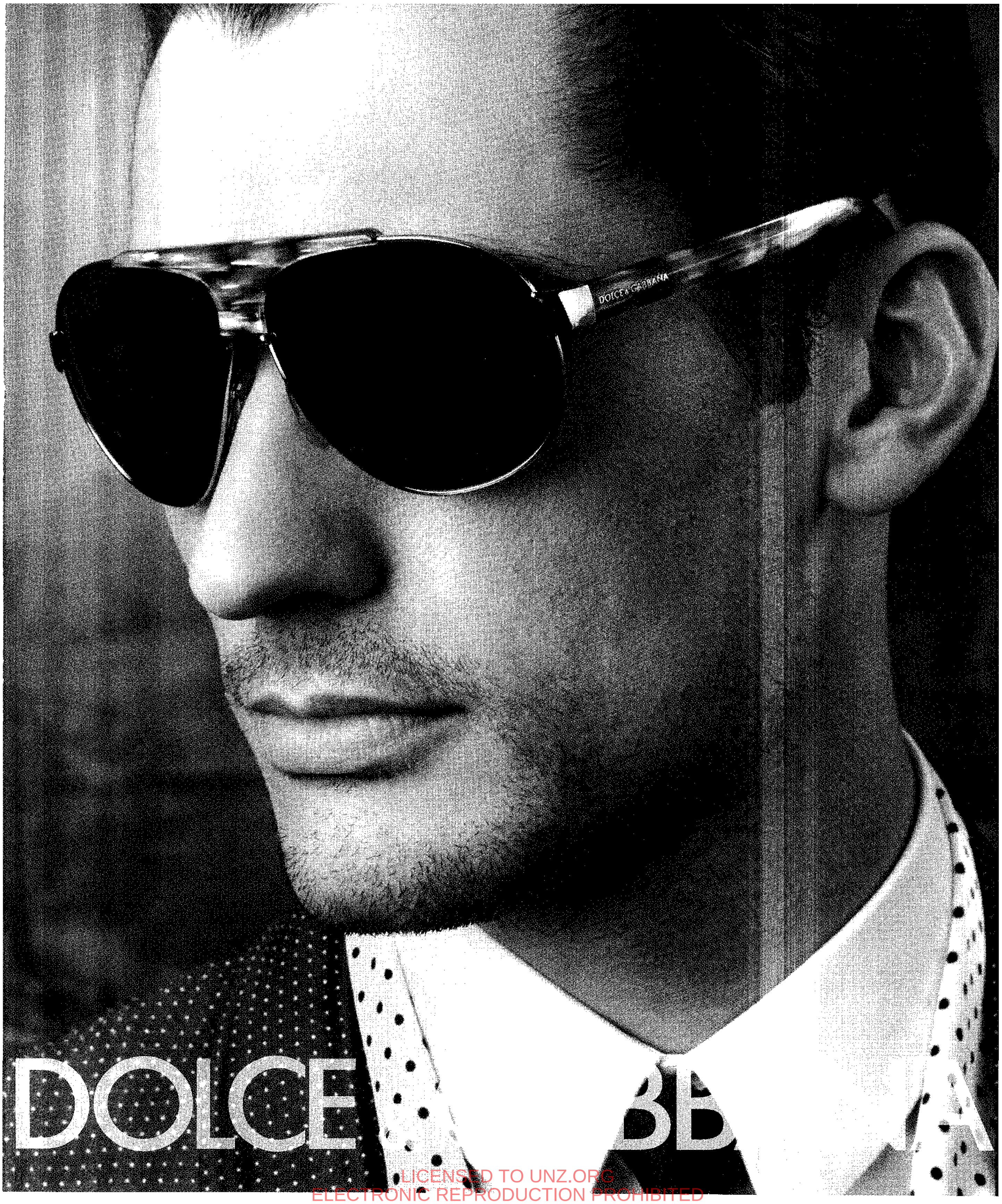
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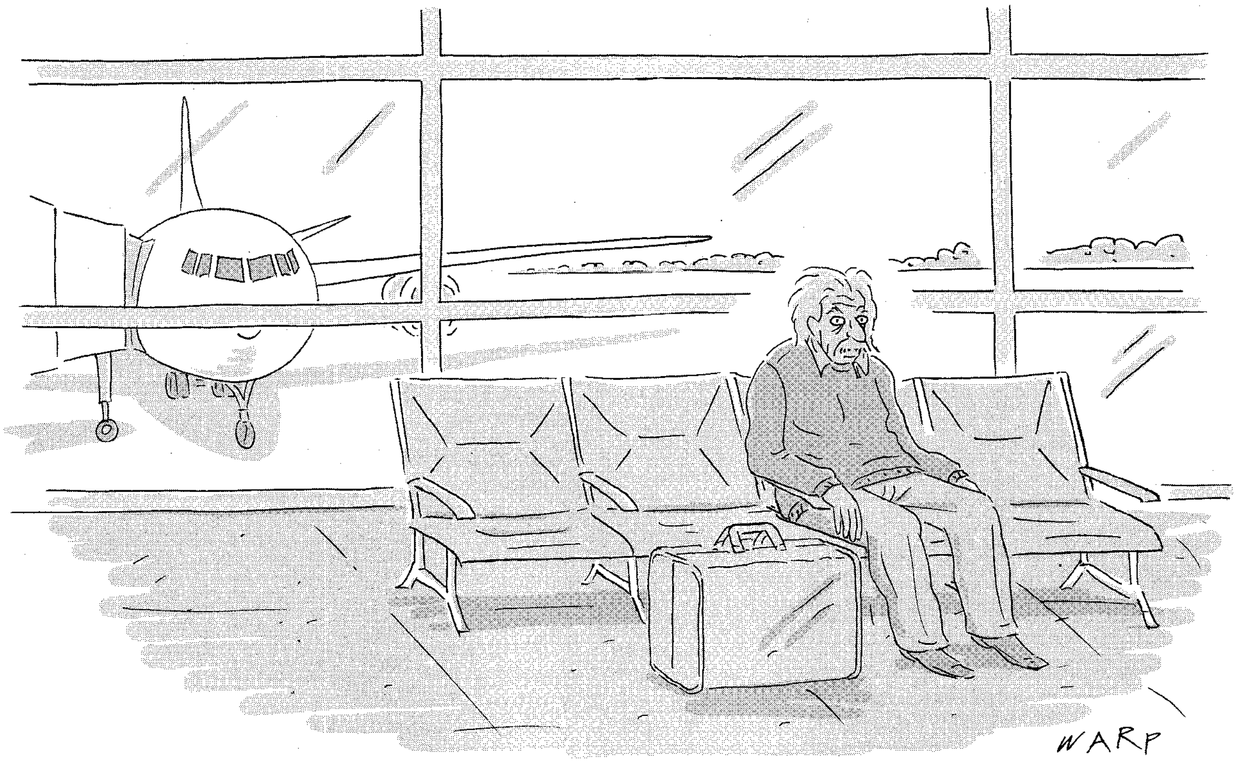

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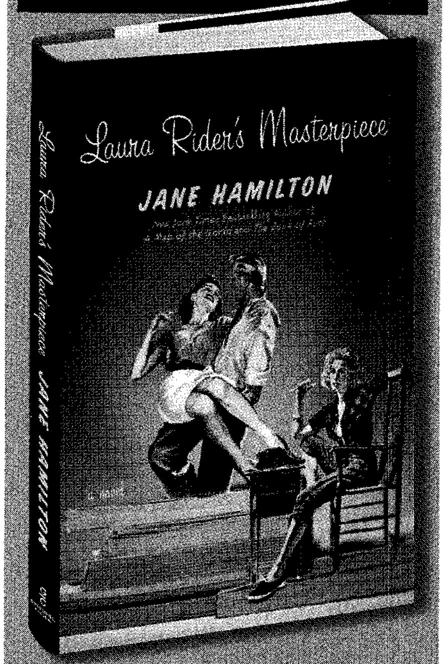

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM
Multimedia: *David Owen* tours Askernish golf course; *Dorothy Wickenden* flips through family albums; Alain Robert climbs a skyscraper. / Audio: *Burkhard Bilger* talks about invasive animals; the Political Scene, a weekly roundtable; *Nathan Englander* reads an I. B. Singer story on the fiction podcast. / *Steve Coll* takes readers' questions, and parses the stimulus bill. / Blog posts by *Hendrik Hertzberg*, *James Surowiecki*, *Amy Davidson*, and *Sasha Frere-Jones*, plus the Book Bench, the Front Row, and more. / Animated cartoons, the caption contest, and a complete archive of issues, back to 1925.

THE MAIL

LOCKED AWAY

Atul Gawande points out that the United States subjects a far greater number of prisoners to prolonged solitary confinement than any other country and, rightly, I believe, describes this as a form of torture ("Hellhole," March 30th). It is a practice that has a long history in this country. Writing in 1842 in "American Notes," after visiting the Eastern Penitentiary, in Pennsylvania, Charles Dickens also condemned solitary confinement, saying, "I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay."
Aryeh Neier
President, Open Society Institute
New York City

An increasing number of jurists throughout the world have concluded that our system of capital punishment constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, in part because the vast majority of U.S. death-row inmates are required to remain alone in their cells twenty-three hours a day and denied virtually any human contact. Unlike other prisoners, however, they are made to endure these barbaric conditions not because of their conduct in prison but because they have been condemned to die, and they have no opportunity to end their isolation through good behavior. Rather, they are made to sit alone in their cells day after day and year after year, envisioning what they continually fear is their impending execution.
John Holdridge
Director, A.C.L.U. Capital
Punishment Project
Durham, N.C.

As one of the Angola Three, I spent twenty-nine years in solitary confinement, at Angola prison, in Louisiana. The two other men, Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox, have been in solitary for three decades. I was released in 2001, but, although a federal judge has overthrown the conviction of Albert Woodfox, and a state court commissioner recommended that Herman Wallace be given a new trial, these decisions have had no effect on their release from solitary. Still, Wallace and Woodfox are unbowed. Both have become canny jailhouse lawyers, and communicate by mail with hundreds of individuals. As I wrote shortly after my release, "There's no describing the day to day assault on your body and your mind and the feelings of hopelessness and despair . . . but sometimes the spirit is stronger than the circumstances."
Robert H. King
Austin, Texas

Gawande brings needed attention to the folly of using isolation to control violence in our nation's crowded prisons. Our commission was troubled to find that overreliance on solitary confinement is a hallmark of too many corrections systems today. Equally troubling is how little we know about who ends up in solitary, for how long, and what impact this practice has on recidivism. A few states, including Mississippi and Ohio, have greatly reduced the numbers in long-term solitary confinement. Although difficult, correctional institutions must meaningfully engage prisoners, or they do more harm than good. A man serving decades in solitary will be released one day as surely as the man who has maintained his sanity and developed internal resources in prison.
Nicholas de B. Katzenbach
John J. Gibbons
Co-chairs, Commission on Safety and
Abuse in America's Prisons
Vera Institute of Justice
Washington, D.C.

•

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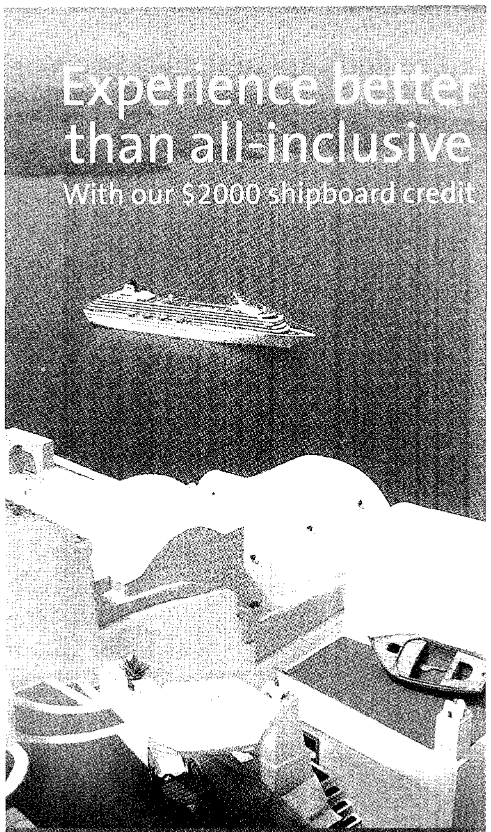

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The installation of Roxy Paine's "Maelstrom," on the roof of the Met. Photograph by Brian Finke.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
19	20	21	15	16	17	18

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
SCHOOL DAZE

Written in response to Molière's "The Misanthrope," Christopher Hampton's comedy "The Philanthropist" stars Matthew Broderick as a professor trying to survive the nasty world of academia. David Grindley ("The American Plan") directs the Roundabout production, at the American Airlines Theatre. (See page 10.)

NIGHT LIFE
EASY LISTENING

A fresh septet stocked with big names—the saxophonists Ravi Coltrane and Steve Wilson, the trumpeter Nicholas Payton, the guitarist Peter Bernstein, the pianist Bill Charlap, the bassist Peter Washington, and the drummer Lewis Nash—celebrates the seventieth anniversary of the Blue Note record label, at Birdland. (See page 14.)

ART
GENERATION MAP

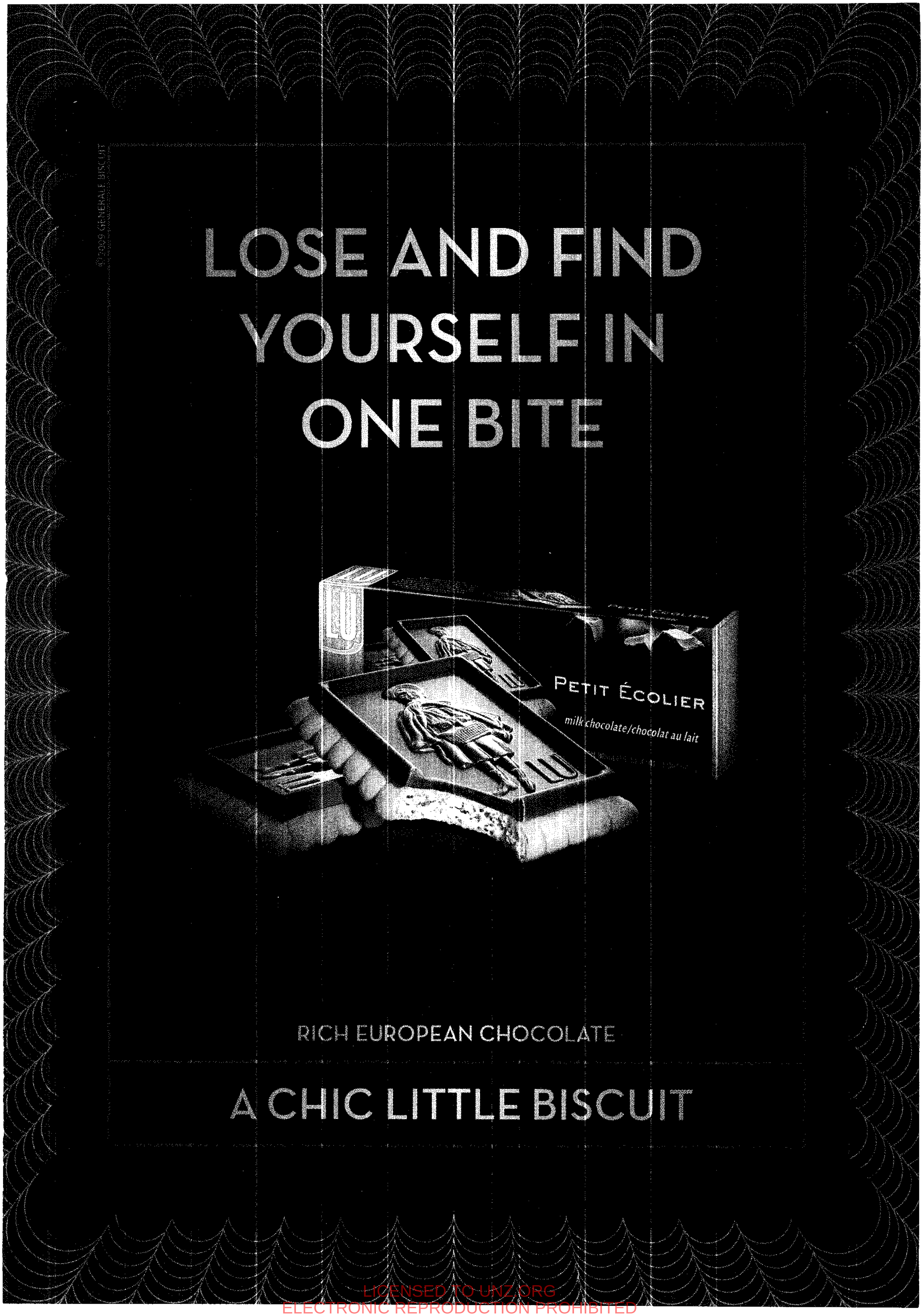
In 1977, "Pictures," a small group show at a downtown nonprofit, signalled a sea change in American art, leaving behind the abstraction of minimalism and developing a new representation influenced by the advertising and entertainment industries—but far more knowingly than Pop art did. "The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984," at the Met, revisits that era with works by Cindy Sherman, Louise Lawler, David Salle, Robert Longo, and others. (See page 14.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
THIRD STRING

With City Opera mostly in abeyance, the fine Dicapo Opera, the city's third professional company, has enjoyed a higher profile. It ends its season with a brief run of Rossini's "L'Italiana in Algeri." (See page 22.)

MOVIES
FROM DOWN UNDER

The former New York Underground Film Festival has now surfaced as "Migrating Forms." Held at Anthology Film Archives, it will offer such works as "Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo," Jessica Oreck's documentary about the fascination aroused in Japan by insects, and "Impolex," a Second World War pastiche thriller, directed by Alex Ross Perry. (See page 26.)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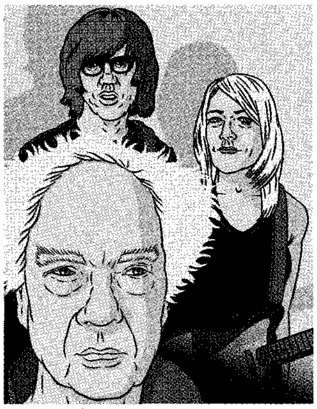
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
YOUTH CULTURE

Might one say that Sonic Youth are the masters of poetic thrash? Yes, considering they invented it. Their sixteenth studio album, "The Eternal," comes out this summer; over the years they have taken their justly famous improvisatory style to a new sprawl—not heights, since Sonic Youth are aural artists who reach out, not up. No album can contain them, or their endless curiosity about sound, which is part of the appeal in listening to what they have to say: they wreck meaning while reinventing it. No wonder they're collaborating with another great dissembler of form—the choreographer Merce Cunningham—for "Nearly Ninety," a commission for Merce Cunningham Dance Company's tenth season at BAM, April 16-19. The show celebrates Cunningham's ninetieth birthday (on April 16) and also features appearances by Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones and the composer Takehisa Kosugi. Like Cunningham, Sonic Youth don't consciously search for the new and the wonder in the everyday—the eternal—they wrote the book on it.


MICHAEL WELDON

—*Hilton Als*

THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

ACCENT ON YOUTH
Manhattan Theatre Club presents Samson Raphaelson's comedy, in which a struggling playwright becomes inspired by his secretary and produces a Broadway hit. David Hyde Pierce and Charles Kimbrough star; Daniel Sullivan directs. In previews. (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS
Eugene O'Neill's 1924 drama, about a woman who has an affair with her stepson, transfers from the Goodman Theatre. Brian Dennehy, Carla Gugino, and Pablo Schreiber star; Robert Falls directs. In previews. (St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

EVERYDAY RAPTURE
Dick Scanlan and Sherie Rene Scott, who also stars, wrote this coming-of-age story, about a Mennonite girl who goes to Manhattan. Michael Mayer directs. In previews. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

FLAMINGO COURT
This comedy by Luigi Creatore, about several residents of a South Florida condo, returns to New York. Steven Yuhasz directs. Opens April 18. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE
The StageFARM presents a new play by Mark Schultz, about a couple desperate to gain entry to a club. The cast includes Bobby Cannavale, Jason Butler Harner, Jackie Hoffman, Sarah Paulson, and Ben Rappaport. Alex Kilgore directs. In previews. Opens April 18. (Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444.)

GOLDEN BOY OF THE BLUE RIDGE
Prospect Theatre Company presents a bluegrass musical adapted by Peter Mills from J. M. Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World," set in Appalachia. Cara Reichel directs. In previews. Opens April 17. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

ILIAD: BOOK ONE
Peter Meineck directs Aquila Theatre's production of the first part of Homer's epic poem. In previews. Opens April 16. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE
Bartlett Sher directs a Lincoln Center Theatre production of August Wilson's play, set in Pittsburgh in 1911. The cast includes Chad Coleman, Ernie Hudson, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Roger Robinson, and Arliss Howard. In previews. Opens April 16. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

MARY STUART
Janet McTeer and Harriet Walter star in Peter Oswald's new version of Friedrich Schiller's play from 1800, about Elizabeth I and her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots. Phyllida Lloyd directs. In previews. Opens April 19. (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

NEXT TO NORMAL
This musical about a dysfunctional suburban family, which opened at Second Stage last year, has music by Tom Kitt and a book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey. Michael Greif directs. Opens April 15. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

9 TO 5: THE MUSICAL
Allison Janney, Stephanie J. Block, Megan Hilty, and Marc Kudisch star in the musical version of the 1980 movie, with original music and lyrics by Dolly Parton and a book by Patricia Resnick. Joe Mantello directs. In previews. (Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE NORMAN CONQUESTS
Alan Ayckbourn's comic trilogy transfers from the Old Vic, directed by Matthew Warchus. "Table Manners," "Living Together," and "Round and Round the Garden" all take place over one weekend at an English country house in the nineteen-seventies. In previews. (Circle in the Square, 235 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

OFFICES
The world première of three new one-act comedies about the workplace by Ethan Coen, directed by Neil Pepe. The cast includes F. Murray Abraham and Aya Cash. In previews. (Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 212-279-4200.)

OTHELLO
The Theatre for a New Audience production returns to the Duke on 42nd Street for a limited run. Arin Arbus directs. Opens April 15. (229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)

THE PHILANTHROPIST
Matthew Broderick, Jonathan Cake, Anna Madeley, and Steven Weber star in the Roundabout Theatre Company production of Christopher Hampton's comedy, about a college professor who is oblivious to the world around him. David Grindley directs. In previews. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

THE SINGING FOREST
At the Public, the New York première of a play by Craig Lucas ("The Light in the Piazza"), about three generations of a family affected by the Holocaust. The ensemble cast, directed by Mark Wing-Davey, includes Jonathan Groff and Olympia Dukakis. In previews. (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

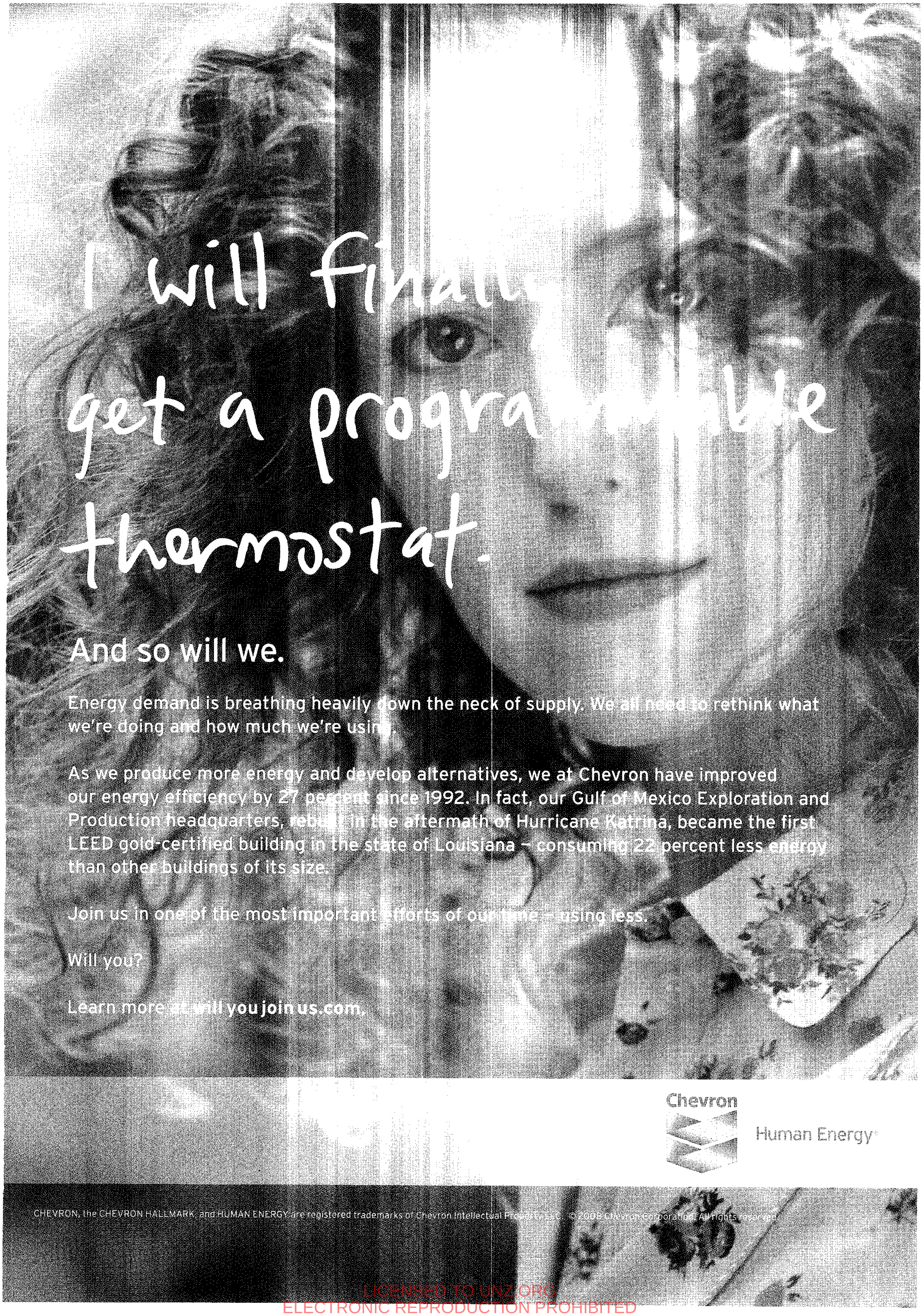
WAITING FOR GODOT
Roundabout Theatre Company presents Samuel Beckett's masterpiece, starring Bill Irwin (as Vladimir) and Nathan Lane (as Estragon). Also with John Goodman (Pozzo) and John Glover (Lucky). Anthony Page directs. In previews. (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

NOW PLAYING

BEOWULF: A THOUSAND YEARS OF BAGGAGE
"This is our mead hall, Heorot. Welcome to our mead hall, please," sings King Hrothgar in this joyfully raucous and silly music-filled play about Beowulf, Grendel, and company by the theatre group Banana Bag and Bodice. The piece takes the form of an academic panel discussing the ancient legend, along with scenes boisterously acted out in full fur-and-helmets rock-opera mode. The propulsive, oompah-inflected music, by Dave Malloy (who also has the role of Hrothgar and plays the accordion), brings out the power and the color of the legend, and the performers are uniformly entertaining, from the backup-singing warriors (Shaye Troha and Anna Ishida) to Jason Craig, the playwright, as Beowulf, and, especially, Jessica Jelliffe, as Grendel's savvy, lake-dwelling mother. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-352-3101. Through April 18.)

LA DIDONE
The U.S. première of the Wooster Group's production of Francesco Cavalli's opera, with a libretto by Francesco Busenello, which tells the story of Aeneas and Dido, with a sci-fi slant. Elizabeth LeCompte directs. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779.)

HAIR: THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE-ROCK MUSICAL
Although the actors performing in Diane Paulus's Shakespeare in the Park production of "Hair" last summer (many of whom appear in the current production) were too clean to be real hippies, they were at least surrounded by the dirt and detritus of Central Park, which seemed a perfect antidote to their collective optimism. In the current production at the Al Hirschfeld, also directed by Paulus, we meet the free-spirited white hippie Berger (the excellent and appropriately narcissistic Will Swenson) and the militant black man Hud (Darius Nichols). The original creators of the show (the book and lyrics are by Gerome Ragni and James Rado) probably felt that they were treating the issues—the way a black man is perceived and the way he perceives himself—with irony and a healthy dose of liberal self-consciousness. But Hud is simply a construction, meant to validate the white hipness of the show. In short, aside from the draft, all the "issues" in "Hair"



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seem to have to do with race, and the task of representing them falls on the overburdened black characters, who have to do almost everything here except tap-dance. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/13/09.) (302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

IRENA'S VOW
Although the flaws of this modest production, directed by Michael Parva, are more obvious on the Broadway stage than they were when it was playing to more intimate audiences Off Broadway, the story itself, which is true, remains undiminished. Irena Gut Opdyke (Tovah Feldshuh), just a teen-ager when the Nazis invaded Poland, in 1939, saved the lives of thirteen Jews by hiding them for nearly two years in the cellar of the high-ranking German officer for whom she kept house. The small, cohesive cast brings Opdyke's horrifying and sad stories to life, and audience members not put off by its Borscht Belt humor and the occasional wonky accent might find Dan Gordon's play inspiring. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

REASONS TO BE PRETTY
The final installment in Neil LaBute's trilogy about America's obsession with physical beauty is fairly vanilla, compared with the first two parts, "The Shape of Things" and "Fat Pig." In this play, a young woman named Steph (the exceptional Marin Ireland) learns that her boyfriend of four years, Greg (Thomas Sadoski), has described her as "regular"-looking. They argue about this, and break up, at which point Steph reads Greg a list of the things that bug her about him. Kent (Steven Pasquale) is the annoying alpha male, and Greg is his more compliant sidekick—at first. Watching women in the audience laugh at Steph's anger and Kent's arrogance is terrifying but predictable. It's as if LaBute's—by now canned and adolescent—"transgressive" point of view were what audiences needed in order to feel anarchic. (4/13/09) (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

ROCK OF AGES
The Broadway equivalent of a ride on a mechanical bull. Constantine Maroulis stars as a bar-back in late-eighties Los Angeles who just wants to rock, and rock hard. In truth, the plot—kudos for even having one—is really just a chain of segues into the hits of Styx, Journey, and Twisted Sister, with toy lighters available for anyone who feels the urge. Chris D'Arienzo, who wrote the surprisingly clever book, knows how to make his audience howl: by keeping the guitar anthems and the Reagan-era references pumping. But the show's secret weapon is Mitchell Jarvis, who, as our faithful narrator, Lonny, has all the antic energy of a Jack Black with nunchakus and a mullet. Is there a Tony Award for badassery? (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

THE TOXIC AVENGER
A new musical based on Lloyd Kaufman's 1985 film, directed by John Rando. (Reviewed in this issue.) (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

WHY TORTURE IS WRONG, AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM
The world première of a comedy by Christopher Durang. Laura Benanti stars; Nicholas Martin directs. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

Also Playing

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY: Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BLITHE SPIRIT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **EXIT THE KING:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **GOD OF CARNAGE:** Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **HAPPINESS:** Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **HUMOR ABUSE:** City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Through April 19. **IMPRESSIONISM:** Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **JAILBAIT:** Cherry Pit, 155 Bank St. 212-868-4444. **JOHN LITHGOW: STORIES BY HEART:** Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **KRAPP, 39:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555. **AN ORESTEIA:** Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101. Through April 19. **OUR TOWN:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444. **RUINED:** City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **33 VARIATIONS:** O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **WEST SIDE STORY:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-239-6200.

"103.5 KTU's Freestyle Free for All," at the Nokia Theatre.

JEROEN KOOLHAAS

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—April 15: **Indigenous** started as a family band. Beginning in 1998, the singer-songwriter and guitarist Mato Nanji, along with his sister, brother, and cousin—from South Dakota's Nakota Nation—released a string of blues records that culminated in the blistering 2006 album "Chasing the Sun." By the time of its release, though, Nanji's family had been replaced by other musicians. Now, there's a new record, "Broken Lands," and Nanji's guitar playing, with its shades of Hendrix and Stevie Ray, is still the focal point. April 16: **Commander Cody** and his band pull into town in their hot-rod Lincoln. April 17: **Y&T**, whose name comes from the title of the Beatles album "Yesterday and Today," had modest chart success in the eighties playing pop-metal paeans to girls, partying, and the power of rock. They're still at it.

BROOKLYN MASONIC TEMPLE
317 Clermont St. (866-468-7619)—April 16: The British industrial-music pioneers **Throbbing Gristle**—part sonic anarchists, part performance artists—return to New York for their first performance since 1981. This extraordinary band—made up of Genesis P-Orridge on vocals, Cosey Fanni Tutti on guitar, Chris Carter on keyboards, and Peter Christopherson manipulating tape machines—formed in London in 1975 and quickly drew renown for provocative and uncompromising performances that sometimes appropriated pornographic and Holocaust imagery as a backdrop. The group's songs feature violent and jarring synthesizer parts, mechanical rhythms, and P-Orridge's out-of-body diatribes, either sung or spoken. While Throbbing Gristle's initial incarnation was relatively short-lived, their unique and brutally modern sound paved the way for a vast array of musical followers, including Nine Inch Nails and Einsturzende Neubauten.

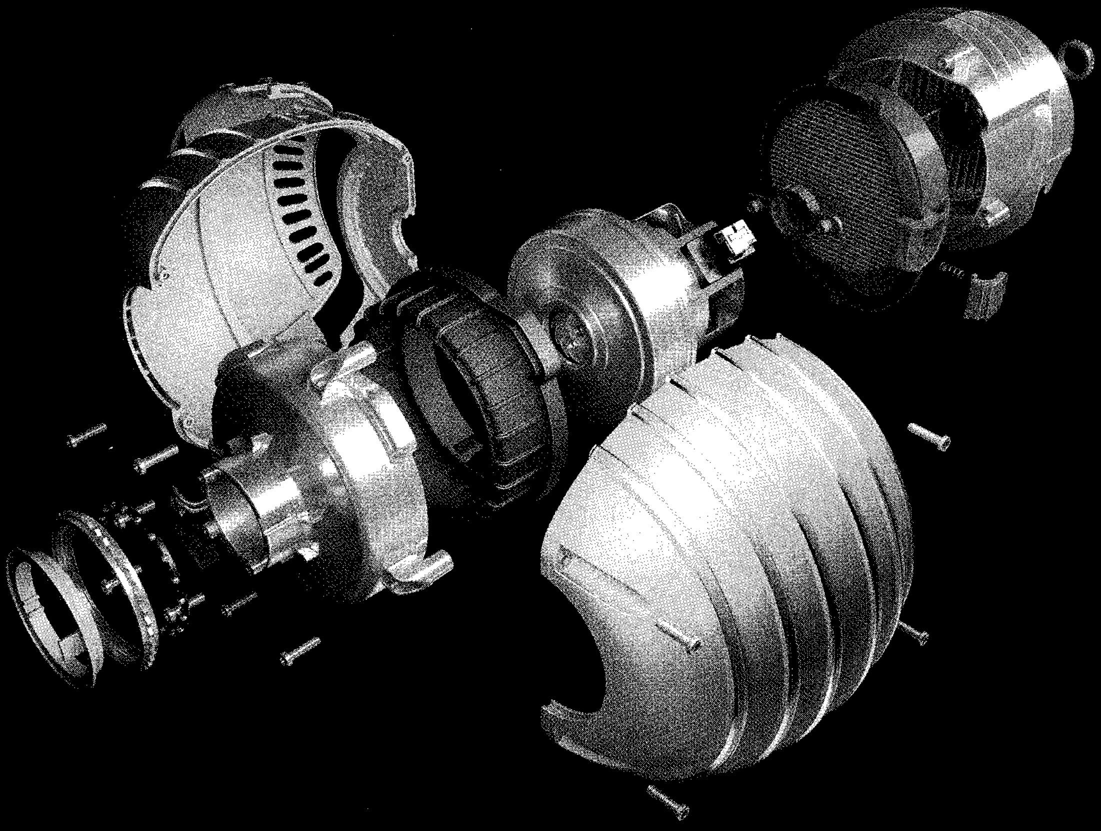
HANK'S SALOON
46 Third Ave., Brooklyn (718-625-8003)—April 19: The bluesy British singer-songwriter **Bex Marshall** once worked as a croupier, and she plays her guitar and sings like she's in a high-stakes game. Later that night, **Sean Kershaw and the New Jack Ramblers** bring down the house with their local rockabilly.

(LE) POISSON ROUGE
158 Bleecker St. (212-796-0741)—April 15: **John Wesley Harding.** His terrifically catchy new record, "Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead," came out last month, and this week Harding wraps up his "Cabinet of Wonders" residency here. Conceived as a vaudeville of music and literature, Harding's show includes the singer-songwriter **Graham Parker,** the magician **Daniel Wallace,** and the writer **Sam Lipsyte.** April 16: **Rhett Miller,** on leave from his barn-burning alt-country outfit Old 97's, stops by with songs from his latest, self-titled solo release. April 18-19: For nearly two decades, the Malian master musician **Toumani Diabaté** and his astonishing **Symmetric Orchestra** have been performing epically long sets on Fridays at the Hogan Club, in Bamako, combining contemporary improvisation with the sonic riches of the Mandé empire. The sets will be slightly shorter here, but no less rewarding.

"LET'S ZYDECO"
April 18: The concert series dedicated to the various indigenous musical forms of Louisiana brings in the hard-driving local act **Johnny Ace & Sidewalk Zydeco.** (Connolly's, 121 W. 45th St. For more information, call 212-685-7597, or visit www.letszydeco.com.)

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—April 17: For more than a decade, the Japanese guitarist Makoto Kawabata has led the cultish psychedelic ensemble **Acid Mothers Temple and the Melting Paraiso U.F.O. (Underground Freak Out)** through countless incarnations. They've released a prolific catalogue of recorded material, and their guiding thread is an emphasis on what Kawabata refers to as extreme trip music. The group draws upon Indian classical music, musique concrète, Deep Purple, and other disparate influences to deliver a shamanistic experience. It can turn from ambient drones to screeching noise without a moment's notice. April 20: **Tinted Windows** is a new supergroup featuring the vocalist Taylor Hanson, the Smashing Pumpkins guitarist James Iha, the Fountains of Wayne bassist Adam Schlesinger, and the Cheap Trick drummer Bun E. Carlos. It plays power pop of an eighties vintage.

NOKIA THEATRE TIMES SQUARE
Broadway at 44th St. (800-745-3000)—April 17: Shortly after it was "morning in America," free-



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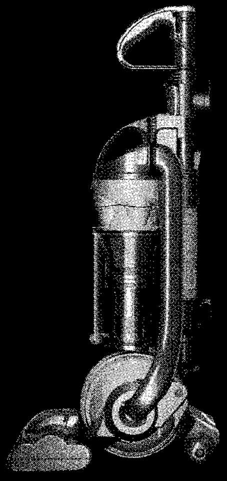

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK NUMBER NINE

Hyperdub is a label that only sometimes acts like one, run by a producer and d.j. who generally refuses to act like one. Steve Goodman, also known as Kode9, founded Hyperdub as a Web site and slowly began releasing records, the best-known by Burial: gorgeous, flickering music that sounds like a London pirate radio station playing from twenty feet away. This fall, Goodman will release a book about the theoretical implications of music's physical vibrations through MIT Press. As an artist and d.j., Goodman is as stubborn as his main act, who remained anonymous for almost four years. Goodman's own recordings wander through various iterations of bass-centric music, sometimes sounding like reggae pressed under a hundred stones, sometimes resembling garage tracks heard through a wall. The dazzling new Kode9 single, "Black Sun," is both crisply cut and melted, jumpy bass notes thrown against long, warped stretches of synthesizer. Kode9 appears at the American Museum of Natural History on April 17 with Flying Lotus.

—Sasha Frere-Jones

style (a vibrant club genre layering synthesizer parts atop Latin-music roots) became the sound of the night. Big hair and skinny beats will be in ample supply as "103.5 KTU's Freestyle Free for All" brings **Exposé** ("Come Go with Me"), **Judy Torres** ("Come Into My Arms"), **Safire** ("Don't Break My Heart"), and other eighties dance-floor heroes back to the stage. April 18: **Bernie Williams,** the former Yankee outfielder and part-time singer-songwriter, celebrates the release of his sophomore album, "Moving Forward."

SOUTHPAW
125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-230-0236)—April 17: A storyteller from a long-lost era, the composer and singer **PT Walkley** spins tales of New York City's financially privileged and morally bankrupt youth on his cinematic début album, "Mr. Macy Wakes Alone." It came out earlier this year, and it was recorded with the help of the guitarist Larry Campbell (Bob Dylan, Levon Helm), the trumpeter Steven Bernstein (Sex Mob, Rufus Wainwright), the string arranger David Campbell (Beck, Johnny Cash), and Sean Lennon. With the piano-driven retro-pop sounds of **April Smith and the Great Picture Show.**

WEBSTER HALL
125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—April 16: The **Walkmen** mix a gritty garage-rock production style (anchored by piano) with an urbane, literary-salon aesthetic, conjuring strains of sophisticated hipster royalty like the Velvet Underground, Talking Heads, and Television. April 18: **Richard Cheese & Lounge Against the Machine** play cheeky cocktail-lounge-ready renditions of contemporary rock favorites. Having milked that particular cow dry after a staggering six albums, the band aimed its swanky shtick at popular TV-show themes with the 2007 collection "Dick at Night." Their latest album, "Viva la Vodka," lampoons everyone from Nirvana to Lil Wayne (with the theme song to "WKRP in Cincinnati" thrown in for good measure).

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE
April 18: The Korean singer and poet **Jang Sa-ik** has become a huge star in his homeland by polishing a classic folk repertoire with contemporary pop and jazz touches. According to a Korean tradition, singers should practice beside a waterfall until their voice develops the strength to drown out the sound of the falling water. It seems like Sa-ik took lessons in the shadow of Niagara. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St.) April 18: The Malian guitarist and singer **Habib Koité** is made for Mayor Bloomberg's New York—his first hit was an antismoking song called "Cigarette Abana." Born into a griot family in Mali and educated at the National Institute of Arts, in Bamako, Koité knows first hand how to link the traditions of the past with contemporary blues and pop. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information about both shows, call 212-545-7536.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—April 14-May 23: **Maude Maggart,** the sultry and sweet-voiced sister of the pop star Fiona Apple, performs songs by Sondheim, Rodgers & Hammerstein, and Gershwin, among others, backed by **John Boswell,** on piano, and **Yair Evnine,** on cello and guitar.

ALLEN ROOM
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—"Icons Among Us: Jazz in the Present Tense" is a four-part documentary soon to air on the Documentary Channel. On April 15, a performance by **Brian Blade and the Fellowship Band** follows a screening of the first episode of the series, "A Quiet Revolution." Blade, a daring musician who has worked with everyone from Wayne Shorter to Bob Dylan, is turning out to be one of the most significant drummers of his generation. His most personal music finds an outlet with his Fellowship band, which adds folk and pop flavorings to its jazz edge.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Recently, to celebrate its seventieth anniversary, Blue Note Records assembled the **Blue Note 7,** and the group cut "Mosaic: A Celebration of Blue Note Records." The release, which came out in January, was a bit staid, but live, the band, which features **Ravi Coltrane, Nicholas Payton, Bill Charlap,** and **Steve Wilson,** has plenty of potential firepower. It's here April 14-19.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—April 14-19: **Jack DeJohnette,** one of the most acclaimed drummers of the postbop era, joins the pianist **Danilo Perez** and the bassist **John Patitucci,** two linchpins of Wayne Shorter's monumental quartet.

CAFÉ CARLYLE
Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—Through April 15: The vocalist **Kelli O'Hara,** who is on maternity leave from the Broadway production of "South Pacific," prepares for motherhood by taking to the small stage.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—April 16-19: On a good night, the extravagantly virtuosic trumpeter **Arturo Sandoval** blows as if he wants to be heard all the way to his native Cuba. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—April 16-18: **Wynton Marsalis,** at the helm of the **Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra,** presents his new composition, "Spaces," a five-movement tap ballet, featuring the dancers **Jared Grimes** and **DeWitt Fleming, Jr.** The trombonist **Vincent Gardner** weighs in with his own "Jesse B. Semple Suite," drawing on stories by Langston Hughes. (See Dance.)

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—April 16-19: The **Fred Hersch Pocket Orchestra.** The incisive pianist Hersch convenes his oddly configured quartet, featuring the trumpeter **Ralph Alessi,** the vocalist **Jo Lawry,** and the percussionist **Richie Barshay.** April 20: The **Mingus Orchestra.**

SMALLS
183 W. 10th St. (212-252-5091)—April 17: The **Peter Zak** quartet features the pianist leader and the saxophonist **Walt Weiskopf,** a spotlighted soloist in Steely Dan.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—The drummer **Paul Motian** is a bandleader of extremes. His trios are bare-bones affairs that often do without a bassist; his larger groups burst with guitarists, bassists, and horn players. His Octet + 1 (here April 14-19) ups the ante with the addition of **Mat Maneri** on violin and viola. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Cast in Bronze: French Sculpture from Renaissance to Revolution."** Through May 24. ♦ **"Raphael to Renoir: Drawings from the Collection of Jean Bonna."** Through April 26. ♦ **"Art of the Korean Renaissance, 1400-1600."** Through June 21. ♦ **"Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors."** Through April 19. ♦ **"Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard."** Through May 25. ♦ **"The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984."** Opens April 21. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective."** Through May 11. ♦ **"Performance 1: Tehching Hsieh."** In grueling performances, each of which lasted three hundred and sixty-five days, the Chinese-born artist punched a time card every hour, was

PAUL WILLOUGHBY

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tied by a short length of rope to another artist, and didn't look at, make, or talk about art. As the no-nonsense title suggests, "Performance 1" documents Hsieh's first yearlong action, in 1978, which he spent inside a cage in his Tribeca loft. He didn't read, write, or talk. Meals were delivered and a bucket sufficed as a toilet (emptied daily by Cheng Wei Kuong). Photos show a pensive Hsieh posing on a mattress and for daily mug shots. The cage itself is also on view. To call the artifacts' almost comically bombastic effect underwhelming is to overstate their impact. Some curators contend that Hsieh is less well-known than peers like Magdalena Abramovic because of his ethnicity. But the truth may be that you just had to be there. Through May 18. ◆ **"a shimmer of possibility: Photographs by Paul Graham."** Through May 18. ◆ **"Projects 89: Klara Liden."** Through June 8. ◆ **"Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West."** Through June 8. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989."** Through April 19. ◆ **"Intervals: Julieta Aranda."** Through July 19. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—**"Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect."** Through May 31. ◆ **"Elad Lassry: Three Films."** Through April 30. ◆ **"Sites."** Through May 3. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Unearthing the Truth: Egypt's Pagan and Coptic Sculpture."** Through May 10. ◆ **"Hernan Bas: Works from the Rubell Family Collection."** Through May 24. ◆ **"Sun K. Kwak: Enfolding Two Hundred and Eighty Hours."** Through July 5. ◆ **"Gustave Caillebotte: Impressionist Paintings from Paris to the Sea."** Through July 5. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Climate Change: The Threat to Life and a New Energy Future."** Through Aug. 16. ◆ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter."** Through May 25. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

ASIA SOCIETY
Park Ave. at 70th St. (212-288-6400)—**"Yang Fudong: Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest."** Through Sept. 13. (Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Friday evenings until 9.)

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Fashioning Felt."** Through Sept. 7. ◆ **"Shazia Sikander Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection."** Through Sept. 7. (Open Mondays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

DRAWING CENTER
35 Wooster St. (212-219-2166)—**"Unica Zürn: Dark Spring."** Opens April 17. (Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 to 6, and Saturdays, 11 to 6)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Masterpieces of European Painting from the Norton Simon Museum."** Through May 10. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—**"Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now."** Through May 3. ◆ **"This Is Not a Fashion Photograph."** Through May 3. ◆ **"Edward Steichen: In High Fashion."** Through May 3. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 to 6, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

JAPAN SOCIETY
333 E. 47th St. (212-752-3015)—**"KRAZY! The Delirious World of Anime + Manga + Video Games."** Through June 14. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 to 6, Fridays, 11 to 9, and weekends, 11 to 5.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—**"Reclaimed: Paintings from the Collection of Jacques Goudstikker."** Through Aug. 2. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45, and Thursdays, 11 to 8.)

MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"On the Money: Cartoons for The New Yorker."** Through May 24. ◆ **"New at the Morgan: Acquisitions Since 2004."** Opens April 17. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-369-4880)—**"184th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art."** Opens April 16. (Wednesdays and Thursdays, noon to 5, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913."** Through June 29. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

NEW MUSEUM
235 Bowery (212-219-1222)—**"The Generational: Younger Than Jesus."** Through June 14. (Open Wednesdays and weekends, noon to 6, and Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 10.)

QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART
Flushing Meadows-Corona Park (718-592-9700)—**"Queens International 4."** Through April 26. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 5.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Kalup Linzy: If It Don't Fit."** Through June 28. ◆ **"Propositions on the Permanent Collection."** Through June 28. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

AARON CURRY
The young L.A. artist borrowed his show's title, "The Colour Out of Space," from an H. P. Lovecraft short story about alien forces, but the overall look of his polychrome sculptures (some nearly twelve feet tall) and ink-and-gouache drawings is less sci-fi than a hybrid of Memphis design and high modernism. (Imagine a collaboration between Ettore Sottsass and Miró or Picasso.) Curry's palette—fluorescent pinks and purples, bright yellows and oranges—is appealingly noxious, but his warmed-over biomorphism and cut-and-paste drawing technique look awfully familiar. Ditto the de-rigueur flourishes of grafitti. Through April 25. (Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623.)

EDWARD STEICHEN / MARTIN MUNKACSI
Current shows at I.C.P. provide the ideal context for these smaller exhibitions of vintage prints by two of the twentieth century's most innovative photographers. The Steichen work, all made early in his career, between 1915 and 1923, is particularly rare and includes several paired still-life images hung side by side to show the rich tonal variations of antique printing processes. The subjects range from flowers, pears, and tenement windows to Isadora Duncan at the Parthenon, many rendered in warm-toned palladium prints that make sepia look wan. A choice group of Munkacsi prints from the thirties, titled "Vitality," is the equivalent of a cardio workout for the eyes. Through May 16. (Howard Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010.)

"THE WOMEN OF THE PHOTO LEAGUE"
Most active in the nineteen-forties, New York's Photo League was known primarily for its com-

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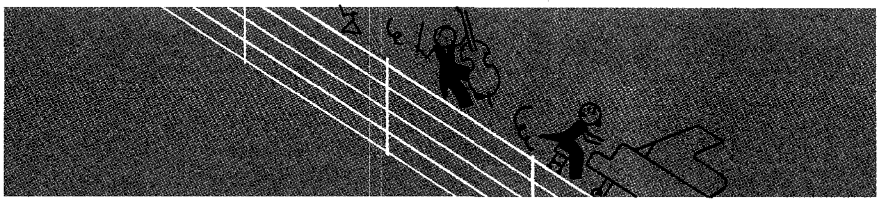

LAURENT CILLUFFO

CLASSICAL NOTES
CHOPIN LIST

Is there a composer who blends shadow and substance as unforgettably as Chopin? The music invades our soul but also stands apart with an aristocratic reserve; the melodies quiver with sensitivity but arise from an intricate web of counterpoint that emulates Bach. And we will never get enough of it, as a new batch of recordings proves.

The two piano concertos represent the composer at his most public and proud, but Lang Lang, in his new disk on Deutsche Grammophon, drains them of any intimacy or sustaining interest. The technique, by itself, is dazzling, and Zubin Mehta and the Vienna Philharmonic manufacture no end of gorgeous sound. But Lang is outclassed by Vassily Primakov, the young Russian pianist who has been taken up by the small but distinguished Bridge label. For Lang, rubato means slowing down whenever a right-hand roulade graces the end of a bar; for Primakov, well supported by the Odense Symphony Orchestra and the conductor Paul Mann, it is a device in which shifts of tempo, tone color, and articulation are blended into a subtly modulating flow. Primakov, a Juilliard graduate, is making a strikingly personal adaptation of the brawny Russian national style. His gifts are on even brighter display in his Bridge recording of Tchaikovsky's solo suite "The Seasons."

Marc-André Hamelin, the Canadian phenom who made his bones by offering stupendous performances of near-forgotten works by such composers as Alkan and Busoni, has reached middle age, and with it the standard repertory. In an album on Hyperion, he brings his effortless dexterity, columnar tone, and intellectual insight to such pieces as the Piano Sonata No. 2, in which he gives an improbable coherence to the work's jump-cut transitions, bizarre motivic gestures (as in the Funeral March), and asymmetrical forms. (His mercurial interpretation of the beloved Nocturne in D-Flat Major, Op. 27, No. 2, is at once fastidious and disturbing.) The logical precision and structural balance of the Sonata No. 3 leave him slightly at sea; a listener may prefer to double back to the warm equanimity of Nadia Reisenberg, whose performance, on the appealing four-disk Bridge release devoted to her ("A Chopin Treasury"), is a model of mid-twentieth-century conservatism.

—Russell Platt

mitment to progressive political causes and social change—a position that landed the organization on the Justice Department's blacklist in 1947. The league didn't survive long after that, but its members have had a lasting impact, as this savvy show focussing on the women among them makes very clear. Helen Levitt, Lisette Model, Barbara Morgan, and Berenice Abbott are the stars here, but the supporting cast—all of whom took the poor and working class as their prime subject—is impressive. Look for work by Vivian Cherry, Sandra Weiner, Consuelo Kanaga, Lida Moser, and Rae Russel. Through May 9. (Higher Pictures, 764 Madison Ave., at 65th St. 212-249-6100.)

Short List

CHARLES BURCHFIELD: DC Moore, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-247-2111. Through April 25. **JAMES CASTLE:** Knoedler, 19 E. 70th St. 212-794-0550. Through April 25. **TACITA DEAN:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through April 30. **FRANZ WEST:** Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677. Through May 2.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

DAVID MUSGRAVE
If the British artist's graphite drawings appear more rearguard than vanguard, look closer. Musgrave's superbly executed, modestly sized works are the heirs of hieroglyphs, early photographs, and Max Ernst's frottage—not to mention the meta-mediations of Christopher Wool. Stick figures, sailor's knots, and other humble oddments are drawn with hazy chiaroscuro, teasing the line between pattern and picture. Creases are rendered with a trompe-l'oeil accuracy worthy of William Harnett. A floor-installed sculpture that mimics a flip book (it looks like scraps of paper, but is actually aluminum) isn't as successful. But it's so imaginative, so minimalism-meets-Muybridge, that Musgrave scores bonus points for effort. Through April 18. (Luhring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St. 212-206-9100.)

STEPHEN PRINA
Like a seditious ghostwriter, the L.A. conceptualist slips his own story into his work, using the lives of other people. His latest subject is Bruce Goff, a modernist architect who designed a wing of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Prina is based in L.A.) and also wrote music (as does Prina). Biographical details may synch up, but Prina's ultimate subject is slippage—most of the works refer to a film shot inside a Goff-designed house in Aurora, Illinois (near the artist's home town), that's not in the show. Three related sequences, filmed outside the house, are projected in a white-carpeted room, at varying heights on three walls. Tension mounts in a row of nearly identical photographs of trees (stills from the film). Across the room, an off-kilter grid of twenty colorful watercolors provides retinal relief. Through May 2. (Petzel, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467.)

BARBARA PROBST
The twenty-two photographs in Probst's new show record just two moments but from many different, simultaneous viewpoints. Both concern women in spare domestic interiors—one in Munich, the other in New York, each identified with the exact address, date, and time that the pictures were taken. Seen in closeup and from across the room, in color and in black-and-white, ordinary gestures (fixing one's hair, reaching for a piece of fruit) take on a peculiar weight. Probst's obsessive prying eyes (including views through a keyhole and parted blinds) suggest Big Brother surveillance—an end in itself. Photography this self-conscious is rarely this intriguing and unnerving. Through April 18. (Murray Guy, 453 W. 17th St. 212-463-7372.)

PATTI SMITH
"I am not a photographer," Smith insists, but photographs dominate this exhibition of drawings, sculpture, and a film by the artist, with camerawork by Jem Cohen (whose own photographs and short films share the gallery). As usual, a mood of romantic melancholy with vaguely spiritual underpinnings pervades the work, especially a series of dark, haunted images of plastic shrouded altars and religious statues in a Spanish church that echo the hushed atmosphere of Brancusi's studio. Other statuary is the subject of smaller photographs here, along with pictures of her children and sites Smith has invested with personal meaning, from Hadrian's library to CBGB's. Unashamedly, unfashionably sincere and poetic, Smith's work demands to be judged on its own terms. Through April 18. (Robert Miller, 524 W. 26th St. 212-366-4774.)

Short List

ADEL ABDESSEMED: David Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070. Through May 9. **ANDREW BUSH:** Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410. Opens April 16; Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370. Opens April 23. **SARAH CAIN / DOUG WADA:** Meltzer, 525-531 W. 26th St. 212-727-9330. Through May 2. **SOPHIE CALLE:** Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105. Through May 22. **DAN FLAVIN / CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD / DEREK JARMAN / MIKA TAJIMA:** X, 548 W. 22nd St. 917-697-4886. Through May 29. **PAUL RAMIREZ JONAS:** Gray, 526 W. 26th St. 212-399-2636. Through May 9. **YAYOI KUSAMA:** Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111. Opens April 16. **MATVEY LEVENSTEIN:** Goldston, 530 W. 25th St. 212-206-7887. Through May 9. **RICHARD ALLEN MORRIS:** Peter Blum, 526 W. 29th St. 212-244-6055. Through May 9. **PABLO PICASSO:** Gagosian, 522 W. 21st St. 212-741-1717. Through June 6. **PETER SAUL:** Nolan, 527 W. 29th St. 212-925-6190. Through May 23. **DANA SCHUTZ:** Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700. Through April 25. **SHAZIA SIKANDER:** Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262. Through May 2. **MICKALENE THOMAS:** Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923. Through May 2. **RYAN TRECARTIN & LIZZIE FITCH:** Dee, 545 W. 20th St. 212-924-7545. Through May 16. **JOHN WATERS:** Boesky, 509 W. 24th St. 212-680-9889. Through May 2.

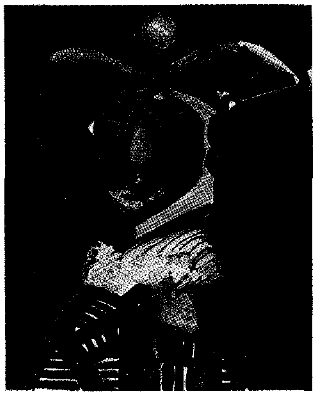
GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

FIA BACKSTRÖM / MARIO GARCÍA TORRES / STEPHEN KALTENBACH
A laid-back counter-culture conceptualism unites works by a Swede (Backström), a Mexican (García Torres), and an American (Kaltenbach, the show's elder statesman). A series of ads by Kaltenbach, placed anonymously in *Artforum*, in 1968 and 1969, offer bare-bones advice ranging from the tactical ("Build a Reputation") to the subversive ("Trip"). García Torres's film of three friends galloping through a museum in Mexico City recasts a scene from Godard's "Bande à Part" as an outlaw act of institutional critique. Strewn throughout are Backström's appealingly homely ceramics, inscribed with lines from a cryptic two-page rhyme connecting Doris Day, brutalist architecture, and civil rights, which she will perform on the last day of the show, at 3—or, in the socially engaged spirit of the proceedings, by appointment. Through April 18. (Hanley, 136 Watts St. 646-918-6824.)

Short List

LAURIE ANDERSON: Location One, 26 Greene St. 212-334-3347. Through May 2. **JOSH BLACKWELL:** Uffner, 47 Orchard St. 212-274-0064. Through May 3. **JENNIFER BORNSTEIN:** Brown, 620 Greenwich St. 212-627-5258. Through May 2. **SIMRYN GILL:** Williams, 313 W. 4th St. 212-229-2757. Through May 2. **ANDREW KUO:** Taxter & Spengemann, 123 E. 12th St. 212-924-0212. Through May 9. **MICHELLE LOPEZ:** Preston, 301 Broome St. 212-431-1105. Through May 17. **RUBEN OCHOA:** Peter Blum, 99 Wooster St. 212-343-0441. Through May 9.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
GRAND FINALE



© 2009 ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY; P.A.R. PHOTOGRAPH BY MARC DOMAGE

Some of us condescended to the last phase of Pablo Picasso's career, dismissing it as lazily slapdash. We ignored who we were dealing with. The Gagosian gallery's museum-worthy "Picasso: Mosqueteros," a show of paintings and prints circa 1962-72, crushes resistance with an installation, by John Richardson, that parses the tactical subtleties of what was, after all, a cogent campaign. Ahead of his time yet again, Picasso anticipated generations of painters who have roughed up the medium in order to resuscitate it. Fragments of his previous styles join ad-hoc painterly improvisations in apparent rushes toward chaos, which an ineffable formality surprises and checks. It's as if one threw sticks in the air and they landed as houses. The themes are richly and scarily comic and erotic. The eponymous musketeers, inspired by Rembrandt and Shakespeare, hilariously strut unwarranted panache. In a 1969 masterpiece, a senile fop sits like a happy baby, proudly clutching an object whose use he appears to have forgotten. (It's a sword.)

—*Peter Schjeldahl*

DANCE

RIOULT
Pascal Rioult's company presents two alternating programs at the Joyce, including a new evening-length work, "The Great Mass," a large-scale composition set to Mozart's Mass in C Minor. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 14 at 7:30, April 15 at 7, April 16-17 at 8, April 18 at 2 and 8, and April 19 at 2 and 7:30.)

LA FAMIGLIA DIMITRI
A troupe of Italo-Swiss circus artists performs at the New Victory. (209 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. April 15 and April 18 at 2 and 7, April 16-17 at 7, and April 19 at noon and 5.)

AILEY II
At the Ailey Citigroup, Alvin Ailey's junior troupe presents one program of new works (several by former company members) and another of slightly older pieces. Both include "Movin' On," a jazz-infused ballroom ballet (set to Betty Carter's rich vocal riffs) by George Faison, who created the Ailey favorite "Suite Otis." (405 W. 55th St. 212-868-4444. Program A, "New Works": April 15 and April 17 at 8 and April 18-19 at 3. Program B, "Repertory Favorites": April 16 and April 18 at 8. Through April 26.)

MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY
A new creation from the mind of Merce—still fertile, still radical—would be event enough. But this is also a ninetieth-birthday party, and the musical guests are the mixed-media composer Takehisa Kosugi, Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones, and the seminal rock band Sonic Youth, who should be right at home in John Cage's shoes. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. April 16 at 7, April 17-18 at 7:30, and April 19 at 3.)

DEGANIT SHEMY & COMPANY
The Israeli choreographer, based in New York, has become known for containing brutal physicality with tight structuring, so it's not surprising that she turned to sports as a subject. The space of "Arena" is more circumscribed than in previous work, the titular area defined by a quadrangle of light. Dressed like a volleyball team, the five women twist and tangle each other into uncomfortable positions—now slo-mo, now whiplash—to the sound of a metronome and periodic roars from a recorded crowd. The erotic implications are not ignored. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 16-18 at 7:30.)

"E-MOVES"
Harlem Stage's valuable dance series turns ten. In celebration, a "Ten for Ten" evening brings back an alum for each year, including Arthur Aviles, Hope Boykin, and Ayodele Casel. "Legends and Legacies" presents six esteemed choreographers, each paired with a dancemaker he or she has influenced—Gus Solomons, Jr., with Kyle Abraham, Donald Byrd with Thaddeus Davis, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar with Nora Chipaumire. The "E-merging/E-volving" program offers candidates for a "Twenty for Twenty" evening in 2019. (Harlem Stage at the Gatehouse, 150 Convent Ave., at 135th St. 212-281-9240. April 16-18 at 7:30. Through April 25.)

DANCES PATRELLE
Now in its twentieth year, Francis Patrelle's pickup company presents two works. "Murder at the Masque" is a ballet whodunit drawn from the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, with a cast that includes several of Twyla Tharp's "Movin' Out" dancers. "Come Rain/Come Shine" (1986) is a series of pas de deux with a pugilistic theme, set to Judy Garland recordings; it will be danced by an impressive cast, including American Ballet Theatre's Marcelo Gomes, Maria Riccetto, and Kristi Boone. (Kaye Playhouse, Park Ave. at 68th St. 212-722-4448. April 16 at 7:30, April 17-18 at 8, and April 19 at 3.)

"JAZZ, TAP, AND THEATER"
Jared Grimes and DeWitt Fleming, best known for their regular tap-and-shtick sessions at B. B. King's, have earned the respect of Wynton Marsalis, who has been inviting the duo to jam with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. Now Marsalis has knocked out a five-part suite for the hoofers called "Spaces." Fleming is a lucid dancer; you can see what he's thinking. Grimes's insane ideas go by too fast for that, but he stays smooth. (Rose Hall, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. April 16-18 at 8.)

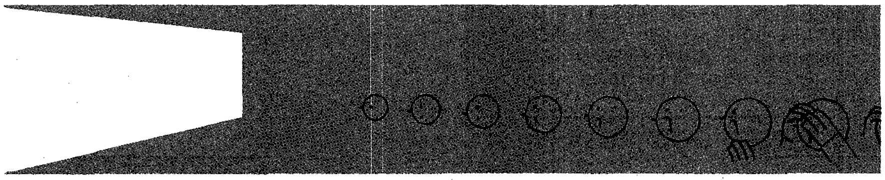
JACK FERVER
The young performance artist's surname brings to mind a quality of his work. To that add outrageousness, surprising subtlety, and huge ambition in subject matter. His new trio, "Death Is Certain," grapples with mortality and the desperate lengths to which humans go in resisting it. Ferver's strategies include sex, or at the least the suggestion of it, and tasks repeated until they can't be repeated anymore. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. April 16-18 at 8:30.)

KEIGWIN KABARET
This year's theme of Larry Keigwin's smartly produced cabaret evenings is "Up, Up, and Away," with performances by Bradford Scobie, Scott Lyons, Launch Movement Experiment, and the ubiquitous Murray Hill. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. April 16-18 at 8:30.)

"WORKS & PROCESS" / "KOOL—DANCING IN MY MIND"
As a complement to the Guggenheim's Asian-inspired exhibit "The Third Mind," Robert Wilson has conceived a complex homage to a longtime collaborator, the master of Japanese classical dance Suzushi Hanayagi (who now suffers from Alzheimer's). Wilson and Carla Blank have created a collage-like installation, crafted from live performances of excerpts of Wilson's work with Hanayagi (danced by Jonah Bokaer and Illenk Gentile), archival footage, film sequences of Hanayagi today, and new dances. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. April 17 at 7:30 and April 18 at 4:30 and 7:30.)

MASTERS OF HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR AND HULA
The slack-key-guitar master Keola Beamer comes from a venerable family of Hawaiian musicians. His concerts are island-casual, as low key as his tunings are slack. The dancing of his wife, Moanalani, is in a similar spirit, authentic but neither theatricalized nor purist-severe. The chanter Charles Ka'upa also samples a little male hula. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-545-7536. April 17 at 8.)

YOUTH AMERICA GRAND PRIX GALA
It's easy to mock ballet galas—the bombast! the soulless ballet chestnuts! But the truth is, the Y.A.G.P. gala is fun. This tenth-anniversary year, the last round of the competition, on April 21, will be open to the public. At the gala, on April 22, there will be fewer youngsters and more alumni, including Sara Mearns (of New York City Ballet), Sarah Lane (of American Ballet Theatre), and Cory Stearns (also of A.B.T.). And in the star department, Yekaterina Kondaurova, Victoria Tereshkina, and Vladimir Shklyarov, of the Maryinsky Ballet, will appear. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. April 21-22 at 7.)



LAURENT CILLUFFO

DVD NOTES
SWINGERS

Over a wide range of genres, Howard Hawks's films are memorable for their musical performances (think of Lauren Bacall and Hoagy Carmichael in "To Have and Have Not" and Dean Martin and Ricky Nelson in the Western "Rio Bravo"). In 1948, Hawks made **"A Song Is Born"** (M-G-M), a remake of his own 1942 comedy "Ball of Fire." He approached the Technicolor extravaganza with indifference, except for the musical scenes, which are some of the finest and strangest work he ever did.

In the original, a gaggle of professors who have been locked away for nine years in a Manhattan town house working on an encyclopedia discover that they know nothing of the vernacular, and one of them goes out to research it. He meets a nightclub chanteuse who, under the guise of providing information, takes refuge with the scholars to avoid a police dragnet, and a love story ensues.

The mustily word-bound original runs mainly on the charisma of its stars, Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck. Though Danny Kaye is more plausible as a naïve intellectual than Cooper, Virginia Mayo, as the singer, can't hold a candle to Stanwyck. But in the remake, the professors are also cutting records to catalogue the history of music, and the pop culture they're missing is jazz. The real star power here comes from the musicians Hawks recruited. Benny Goodman (who plays one of the professors), Louis Armstrong, and Lionel Hampton are among the luminaries featured in a host of numbers, including a comical jam on Goodman's own hit "Stealin' Apples," in which the square clarinet professor learns jazz from a book. (Hawks even took time out from the shoot to listen to the musicians jamming, and recorded a set of private 78s for his own pleasure.) Another number, a condensed history of jazz, approaches the subject blandly until Armstrong takes over and restores its primal scream.

Yet the most extraordinary thing in the film is the bizarre and uproarious sixteen-minute set piece with which it begins. The professors are recording some Brahms when their late patron's spinster daughter shows up with the intention of cutting off the project's financing. In order to persuade the woman (who has a crush on Kaye's Professor Frisbee) to keep the money flowing, the musicologists perform for her a "Polynesian love chant" that shows "the relation of music to courtship." She is induced to take part in a drum-heavy rite with Frisbee, in which the two exchange "the mating call" while he gets her to adopt "the native position" and to exert "the diaphragmatic pressure so necessary to the primitive sound"—a series of rhythmic erotic grunts that, of course, achieve the desired effect and set the plot in motion.

—*Richard Brody*

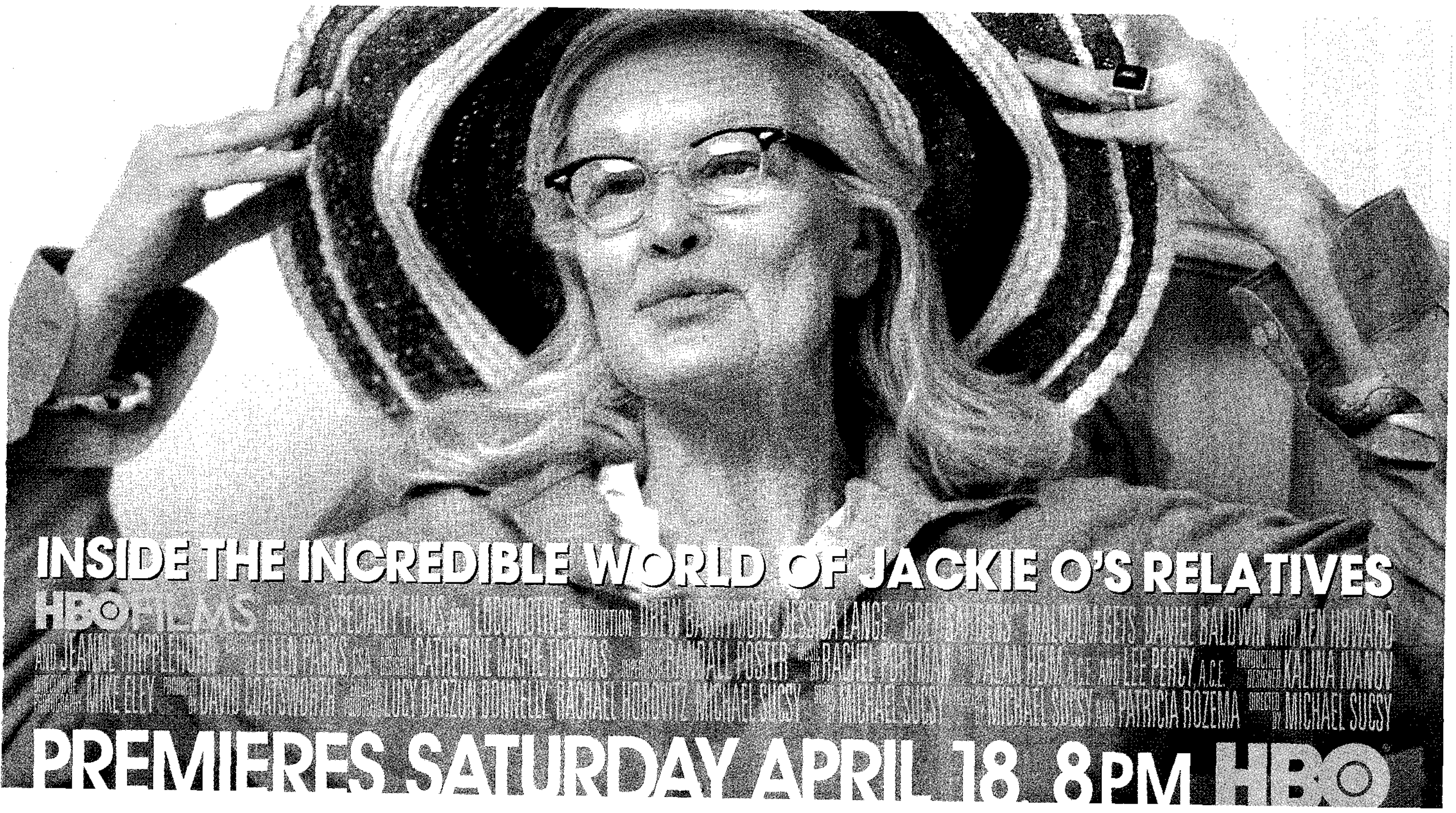
CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Donizetti's bucolic comedy **"L'Elisir d'Amore"** is a near-perfect swirl of melody and lyricism in neatly arranged scenes, though John Copley's exaggerated production, originally created for Pavarotti and Kathleen Battle in 1991, looms grotesquely over the more subtle personalities in this revival. Dmitri Pittas replaces Rolando Villazón in the role of Nemorino, joining a fine cast led by Angela Gheorghiu, who unleashes some of the most dazzling vocalism she's offered in recent seasons. With Franco Vassallo and Simone Alaimo; Maurizio Benini conducts. (April 15 at 8.) ♦ With the up-and-coming soprano Nicole Cabell replacing

DREW BARRYMORE JESSICA LANGE

GREY GARDENS

TRUE GLAMOUR NEVER FADES



INSIDE THE INCREDIBLE WORLD OF JACKIE O'S RELATIVES

HBO FILMS PRESENTS A SPECIALTY FILMS AND LOCOMOTIVE PRODUCTION DREW BARRYMORE JESSICA LANGE "GREY GARDENS" MALCOLM GETS DANIEL BALDWIN WITH KEN HOWARD AND JEANNE TRIPPLEHORN CASTING BY ELLEN PARKS CSA COSTUME DESIGNER CATHERINE MARIE THOMAS MUSIC SUPERVISOR RANDALL POSTER MUSIC BY RACHEL PORTMAN EDITED BY ALAN HEIM A.C.E. AND LEE PERCY A.C.E. PRODUCTION DESIGNER KALINA IVANOV DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MIKE ELEY PRODUCED BY DAVID COATSWORTH EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS LUCY BARZUN DONNELLY RACHAEL HOROVITZ MICHAEL SUCSY STORY BY MICHAEL SUCSY TELEPLAY BY MICHAEL SUCSY AND PATRICIA ROZEMA DIRECTED BY MICHAEL SUCSY

PREMIERES SATURDAY APRIL 18 8PM HBO

Gheorghiu. (April 18 at 8:30.) ♦ The clear, bracing Marthe Keller production of **“Don Giovanni”** returns to the stage for a brief end-of-season run. Much of the cast—including Barbara Frittoli, Isabel Bayrakdarian, and, not least, the commanding baritone Peter Mattei, in the title role—is rock solid. Samuel Ramey makes a surprising, late-career return to the demanding role of Leporello; two promising young singers—Erin Wall and Pavol Breslik—are making their débuts in this revival; Louis Langrée. (April 16 and April 20 at 8.) ♦ In his latest outing as the Duke, in **“Rigoletto,”** Joseph Calleja proves himself to be the Brazil of singers: he’s the tenor of the future, and always will be. The big, honeyed tone—the purest and most appealingly Italianate sound since Pavarotti—has acquired a slightly darker tinge, but certain elements of craft (breath control, dynamics) remain subjects for him to work on, or, perhaps, ignore. (The crowd is with him.) He could do worse than to listen to his superb colleagues, Diana Damrau (as Gilda) and Roberto Frontali (in the title role), who provide textbook examples of immaculate vocal production and convincing dramatic presence. With Viktoria Vizin and Raymond Aceto; Riccardo Frizza’s crisp and idiomatic conducting is another plus. (April 17 at 8. This is the final performance.) ♦ The colorful Otto Schenk production of “Der Ring des Nibelungen”—the signature effort of the James Levine era at the Met—has its last go-round this spring, to be replaced by a new Robert Lepage production beginning in 2010. The house is slowly adding each of the titanic operas to the repertory; next comes **“Siegfried,”** with a strong ensemble cast that features Iréne Theorin, Jill Grove, Christian Franz, Gerhard Siegel, and the redoubtable James Morris; Levine himself is in the pit. (April 18 at noon.) ♦ David McVicar’s fine new production of **“Il Trovatore”** successfully reclaims Verdi’s ardent melodrama for the house. This performance features Hasmik Papian, Luciana D’Intino, Marco Berti, and Željko Lučić; Riccardo Frizza. (April 21 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

DICAPO OPERA: "L'ITALIANA IN ALGERI"
New York’s third professional company closes its venturesome season with a return to tradition—Rossini’s comic masterpiece from 1813. The cast includes Gabriella Garcia, Todd Robinson, and John Bernard; Samuel Bill conducts. (Dicapo Opera Theatre, 184 E. 76th St. 212-288-9438. April 16 at 7:30, April 17-18 at 8, and April 19 at 4.)

A 1997 photograph by Andrew Bush, from his “Vector Portraits,” at Milo and Saul.

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
In the first round of a two-week residency, Riccardo Muti, a longtime favorite with the Philharmonic and its audience, collaborates with the elegant and incisive pianist Mitsuko Uchida in a program featuring Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G Major and Schubert’s Symphony No. 9 (the “Great”). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. April 15-16 at 7:30, April 17 at 11 A.M., and April 18 at 8.)

YOUTUBE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
The waiting is done: the world’s first orchestra selected by way of online auditions assembles at Carnegie Hall under the baton of Michael Tilson Thomas. The violinist Gil Shaham and the soprano Measha Brueggergosman appear live, while Lang Lang and Yo-Yo Ma participate by video hookup in a concert that will feature the full orchestra as well as smaller groups digging into music by Bach, Mozart, Brahms, Cage, Mason Bates, and Tan Dun, all in a rich multimedia environment. (212-247-7800. April 15 at 7:30.)

CHANTICLEER: "WONDROUS FREE"
Choral aficionados flock to hear this extraordinary all-male choir in its regular appearances at the Metropolitan Museum (which in this case means the Temple of Dendur). The program mixes American vocal music by such composers as Billings, Barber, Paul Chihara, and David Conte with more exotic selections from around the world. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. April 15 at 8.)

BAM: THE ST. MATTHEW PASSION
It seems that Jonathan Miller’s “street-clothes” theatrical production of Bach’s Biblical masterwork has attained mythic status in Brooklyn: this is BAM’s fourth presentation, an event that will feature both the Clarion Orchestra and the Rebel Baroque Orchestra, along with such fine singers as Rufus Müller, Curtis Streetman, Phyllis Pancella, and Stephen Varcoe. Paul Goodwin conducts. (BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St. 718-636-4100. April 17-18, April 21-22, and April 24-25 at 7:30.)

ORATORIO SOCIETY OF NEW YORK: THE B-MINOR MASS
Kent Tritle, Manhattan’s choral man of the moment, leads the excellent avocational group in its spring concert, a performance of Bach’s magnum opus that will feature such solo singers as Leslie Fagan and Rufus Müller. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. April 20 at 8.)

RECITALS

"SACRED MUSIC IN A SACRED SPACE": OLIVIER LATRY
In the realm of organ music, this is as good as it gets—Latry, the titular organist of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, performs sumptuous classics from the French repertory by Franck (the Choral No. 2), Vierne, Widor, and Alain on the N. P. Mander instrument at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola. (Park Ave. at 84th St. 212-288-2520. April 15 at 7:30.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER
Even with the Society’s return to the renovated Alice Tully Hall, its intimate Rose Studio concerts have remained a popular sideline. The pianist (and Society artistic director) Wu Han joins the excellent young Jupiter String Quartet in a concert of works by Shostakovich (the Seventh Quartet, and the Piano Quintet) and Sofia Gubaidulina. (April 16 at 6:30 and 9:30.) ♦ George Tsontakis, the Society’s accessible and inventive “season composer” (and a winner of the coveted Grawemeyer Award), gets a chance to shine in a program by the piano quartet Opus One that combines two of his works (“KnickKnacks” and Quartet No. 3 for Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello, both in their New York premières) with music by Beethoven and Brahms (the Piano Quartet in C Minor). (Alice Tully Hall. April 17 at 7:30 and April 19 at 5.) (212-875-5788.)

YING QUARTET
This four-sibling ensemble may have been launched as a novelty, but they have entered their second decade together because of their musical excellence. They come to Carnegie’s Weill Recital Hall to offer quartets by Mendelssohn, Bartók (the elegiac No. 6), and Dvořák (No. 14 in A-Flat Major). (212-247-7800. April 17 at 7:30.)

CHRISTOPHER O'RILEY
The American pianist, making a stir with his transcriptions of finer pop pieces, continues a three-concert series at Miller Theatre with a program mixing works by Debussy with selections by the melancholy folk icon Nick Drake. Stephen Byram and Jonathon Rosen create a live video accompaniment as the music plays. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. April 17 at 8.)

ANDRÁS SCHIFF
The renowned Hungarian musician, a pianist of both luxurious sound and intellectual fire, has been an alluring but idiosyncratic performer of Beethoven. He completes his two-year survey of the sonatas this week. April 17 at 8: The Sonatas Nos. 27, 28, and 29 (“Hammerklavier”). ♦ April 19 at 2: The valedictory Sonatas Nos. 30-32. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)

PEOPLES' SYMPHONY CONCERTS: PETER SERKIN
The longtime low-price recital series, which has never lacked for star performers, brings the magisterial pianist to Town Hall for a concert of music by Debussy (“Six Épigraphes Antiques”), Brahms (the “Handel Variations”), Bach, and the Renaissance master John Bull. (123 W. 43rd St. 212-586-4680. April 19 at 2.)

THE MOVADO HOUR: ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET
Impassioned quartets by Mendelssohn (in F Minor, Op. 80) and R. Murray Schafer are on offer from the renowned Canadian string quartet, which performs in this stylish series of one-hour concerts held at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. A wine reception begins the evening. (450 W. 37th St. April 20 at 7. To reserve free tickets, which are required, call 212-279-4200.)

"ELLIOTT CARTER & HEINZ HOLLIGER: A MUSICAL FRIENDSHIP"
Holliger, from Switzerland, is the world’s preëminent oboist; Carter is considered by many to be

the world's finest composer. It's been a long and devoted relationship, and it will be celebrated at the 92nd Street Y. April 21 at 8: The formidable Zehetmair Quartet (led by the violinist Thomas Zehetmair) performs string quartets by Carter ("Fragment," from 1994), Bruckner, and Beethoven (the Quartet in F Major, Op. 135), along with Holliger's own Quartet No. 2, dedicated to Carter. ♦ April 22 at 6:30: In a pre-concert performance, Holliger and a distinguished roster of musicians (including the harpist Ursula Hollinger and the clarinettist Charles Neidich) offer works by Holliger, Carter (including "Au Quai" and "Figment IV"), Wolpe, and Ruth Crawford-Seeger (the Diaphonic Suites Nos. 1 and 2). ♦ April 22 at 8: The final concert features the Quartets for Oboe and Strings by Carter and Mozart, as well as other Carter pieces (such as the "Four Lauds," for violin solo). (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

MOVIES OPENING

CRANK: HIGH VOLTAGE
A thriller, directed by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, about a hit man whose artificial heart requires regular electric shocks. Opening April 17. (In wide release.)

EVERY LITTLE STEP
Adam Del Deo and James D. Stern directed this documentary, about actors trying out for a revival of "A Chorus Line." Opening April 17. (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

LEMON TREE
In this drama, directed by Eran Riklis, a Palestinian woman (Hiam Abbass) defends her lemon grove against an Israeli official. In Hebrew, Arabic, French, and English. Opening April 17. (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

OBLIVION
A documentary, directed by Heddy Honigmann, about economic inequality in Peru. In Spanish. Opening April 15. (Film Forum.)

PERESTROIKA
Slava Tsukerman directed this drama, about a physicist who returns to Moscow in 1992 after seventeen years in exile. Starring Sam Robards, F. Murray Abraham, Maria Andreyeva, and Ally Sheedy. Opening April 17. (Cinema Village.)

17 AGAIN
Zac Efron and Leslie Mann star in this comedy, about a man who finds himself transformed into a teen-ager. Directed by Burr Steers. Opening April 17. (In wide release.)

SLEEP DEALER
A thriller, about three strangers who break the rules of their postapocalyptic society in order to communicate with each other. Directed by Alex Rivera. Opening April 17. (Empire 25 and Cinema Village.)

STATE OF PLAY
Kevin Macdonald directed this thriller, based on a BBC television series and co-written by Tony Gilroy, about the investigation of the murder of a congressman's mistress. Starring Russell Crowe, Rachel McAdams, Ben Affleck, and Helen Mirren. Opening April 17. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

À NOS AMOURS
The teen-aged Sandrine Bonnaire made her explosive début in this impassioned 1983 melodrama by Maurice Pialat, which is one of the cinema's greatest depictions of a father-daughter relationship. As Suzanne, the younger child in a Polish immigrant family in Paris that is torn apart by conflict, Bonnaire embodies with feral grace and erotic daring a girl with a woman's body, an adult's cold lucidity, and a child's unfulfilled emotional needs. The story spans many years, from a summer-camp idyll through marriage,

CELEBRATING THE BICENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF CHARLES DARWIN

Does evolution explain human nature?

Quite well.

Lynn Margulis

Ever since Bishop Wilberforce asked, in a debate with Thomas Huxley, whether it was from his grandmother or grandfather that he claimed descent from a monkey, the sufficiency of *evolutionary theory to explain humanity's spiritual and moral qualities has* been in question... CONTINUED ONLINE

Not entirely.

Francis Collins

The evidence in support of Darwin's theory of evolution is overwhelming. In my own field of genomics, the digital record of the long history of life on this planet *provides incontrovertible proof of* descent from a common ancestor... CONTINUED ONLINE

Visit www.templeton.org/evolution to read essays on this question by:

Francisco Ayala | Francis Collins | Simon Conway Morris | Frans de Waal
Eva Jablonka | Lynn Margulis | Geoffrey Miller | Martin Nowak
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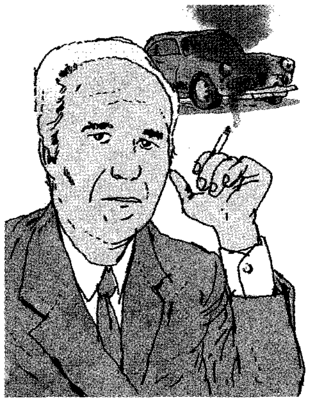
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
BACKSTORY

Admirers of Michel Piccoli know better than to ignore any film, however slight, that is anchored and calmed by his presence. The news that, on April 18, BAM will screen "Les Choses de la Vie"—"The Things of Life," which could hardly be plainer—is all the more welcome, for here is one of his gravest performances. He plays an architect, Pierre, who has left his wife and grownup son to be with Hélène (Romy Schneider). Musing on his past, and caught between possible futures, he crashes his car, and lies unconscious in a field; the director, Claude Sautet, winds backward from the smash (which is shown in reverse) and traces the paths that led there. The movie, from 1970, shows its age, and Sautet's portrait of prickly love cannot compare with Godard's far sharper examination of Piccoli and Brigitte Bardot in "Contempt," made seven years earlier. But the leading man holds our gaze: lean, confident, and manly, removing his cigarette only to speak his lines, yet profoundly pained by the sense of a life that has veered off course.

—*Anthony Lane*



VICTOR MARCHAND KERLOW

and, though Suzanne declares, "I'm only happy when I'm with a guy"—and she has plenty of them—the story's tensile arc is formed by her father, through both his presence and his absence. The film is rendered all the more poignant by the presence of Pialat himself as the father, who places tight demands on his family as he pursues the freedom that had eluded him in decades of responsibility. The powerful cast (including Evelyne Ker as Suzanne's mother, Dominique Besnehard as her brother, and Cyril Collard and Christophe Odent as her lovers) enters the vortex of fearsome emotional storms; rarely has family love been depicted as such a violent, catastrophic necessity. In French and English.—*Richard Brody* (BAM; April 19.)

ADVENTURELAND

The year is 1987, and a bunch of misfits who work at a dreary amusement park in Pittsburgh spend the summer grousing, toking up, and making out with each other. Greg Mottola's autobiographical movie is tenderly funny and lovable but also organically conceived—the colors, the music, and the moods all flow together. The picture has a melancholy lilt. The hero, James Brennan (Jesse Eisenberg), intellectual and excessively self-conscious, falls in love with Em (Kristen Stewart), a beautiful girl who hates her life and is lost in a sordid affair; James, making many mistakes along the way, slowly finds himself. This coming-of-age story is enlivened by Mottola's special generosity toward balled-up smart people who angrily reject conventional success yet remain desperate for acceptance. The manic Bill Hader and a silent, abashed Kristen Wiig play the couple that run the place; Martin Starr is a morosely unattractive Russian-lit major who complains about everything in the lugubrious drone of a campus coffee-shop wit. The only weak bit of casting is the Canadian actor Ryan Reynolds, who's too timid to play a good-looking cad with the proper conviction. The ghastly music playing endlessly on the park's loudspeakers is relieved by the music that the kids play for themselves, including Lou Reed, the Cure, and Hüsker Dü.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 4/13/09.) (In wide release.)

CHARULATA, A.K.A. THE LONELY WIFE

Based on a story by the Indian literary giant Rabindranath Tagore and set in Bengal in the eighteen-seventies, this romantic-triangle picture by Satyajit Ray is a pellucid tale about the lonely wife of a liberal newspaper editor and her inchoate longing for his younger cousin (who, in Bengalese custom, is considered the wife's brother-in-law). The scenes in which Charu, the wife (Madhabi Mukherjee), and Amal, the cousin (Soumitra Chatterjee), sublimate their passion through literature have a comic-romantic charm: their proper sensibilities prevent them from ever admitting their feelings, let alone acting upon them. Charu's husband, Bhupati (Shailen Mukherjee), is slow to notice her ennui. He pens political criticism and spends all his time in the office, removed from the spectacle of the streets. Ray recognizes the paradox that reformers are often insulated from the people for whom they toil, but the movie is too stately and attenuated. He would handle these themes with more depth and power twenty years later, in his adaptation of Tagore's novel "The Home and the World." In Bengali. Released in 1964.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Society of Lincoln Center; April 17-18 and April 20.)

DUPLICITY

The writer-director Tony Gilroy at play. In the first scene of this combined romantic comedy and caper movie, Claire Stenwick (Julia Roberts), a C.I.A. operative, and Ray Koval (Clive Owen), an MI6 agent, meet at a sunny garden party at the American Embassy in Dubai, and we immediately know we're in fast company—the stars' bantering rhythm is so natural and easy that it's already an early stage of sex. Claire and Ray then leave national service, join rival cosmetics firms, and try to steal the formula for an important new product. The sardonic joke animating "Duplicity" is that corporate espionage is now carried out with the same complex scams, ploys, and thefts that rival intelligence services used at the height of the Cold War. Gilroy is conning us, too, with a series of flashbacks to different places (including a beautiful stretch of Rome's old city), in which Ray and Claire meet and conduct variations on the same conversation again and again. Are they really working together? The characters lie, test, probe, reverse themselves, fall into bed and out of it. The trickiness may add little of substance, but the stars' alertness to each other's moods is charming and often richly funny and sexy. With Paul Giamatti and Tom Wilkinson, as rival megalomaniac C.E.O.s. Edited by John Gilroy.—*D.D.* (3/30/09) (In wide release.)

GOODBYE SOLO

A taxi passenger named William (Red West), perhaps seventy, a pouchy-eyed white Southerner, demands to be taken, in a week's time, to a mountain perch outside the city called Blowing Rock. We're in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and the driver, Solo (Souleymane Sy Savane), a Senegalese immigrant, young, handsome, and endlessly cheerful, refuses to help William carry out his apparent plan for suicide. Solo tries to reconcile his passenger to life, even moving in with him in his motel room, where they make a very strange couple. The independent writer-director Ramin Bahrani establishes the streets of Winston-Salem clearly enough, particularly at its squalid edges. Yet the movie, with the help of its realistic base, lifts off into an existential fable: one man's exuberant embrace of life crashes into the other's adamant rejection of it. Why does the old man want to die and the young man so badly need to save him? The power of the fable is derived from Bahrani's unwillingness to solve these mysteries beyond a few hints. Red West has a voice like raw whiskey; Savane's smile and rapid movements light up any space that he inhabits. You will think of them both for days after seeing the movie.—*D.D.* (4/13/09) (In limited release.)

THE GREAT BUCK HOWARD

A strange, stodgy throwback of a picture—reflecting, perhaps, its principal character, who is a throwback himself. For years, Buck Howard (John Malkovich) has worked as a stage mentalist, crossing the country and reading the minds of its citizens. He used to be a regular on the "Tonight Show," with Johnny Carson, but that was ages ago; now he plays to older audiences in smaller towns. He takes on a new assistant, in the shape of Troy (Colin Hanks)—a pleasant fellow, who keeps telling us (in a superfluous voice-over) how life-changing the experience has been, although he seems no less dull at the end of it than he did at the start. The director is Sean McGinly, who directs as if he himself were Troy, barely roused by the magic of the maestro. In more encouraging hands, Malkovich might have turned on the menace, but he seems only half-engaged by the tale, as does the rest of a surprisingly strong cast—Steve Zahn, Griffin Dunne, Ricky Jay, and Tom Hanks, who plays Troy's disapproving dad. The whole thing is shaken awake for a while by the earthy Emily Blunt, before drifting back to sleep.—*Anthony Lane* (3/23/09) (In wide release.)

HUNGER

The British video artist Steve McQueen has re-created the famous 1981 hunger strike staged by I.R.A. warriors, and led by Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender), at Maze prison, in Northern Ireland. The strike, which attracted international attention, resulted in the agonizingly slow death of ten men. The movie is as much religious, even sacerdotal, as it is political in intent. The men smear the walls with excrement, spill the chamber pots under the doors so the urine gathers in the hallways, suffer brutal punishments in reprisal, and prepare themselves for martyrdom. In a powerfully written conversation with Sands, Father Dominic Moran (Liam Cunningham), a tough priest, accuses him of not loving life, of having lost touch with the world and any rational political purpose. He's exactly right, but the movie takes the opposite view, that the men are sainted in their naked anguish. In the end, one is awed but not moved by the film. Sands is a violent man who dies in the service of a dubious cause and on a cross of his own choosing. He's a Christ without humanity, and McQueen's aestheticization of his suffering and death is borderline creepy.—*D.D.* (3/30/09) (In limited release.)

LÉON MORIN, PRIEST

Jean-Pierre Melville's 1961 drama, based on a novel by Béatrix Beck, is a strange hybrid and one of the most peculiarly mutilated films ever. Set in a small French town, it spans the years of the Second World War and the Occupation and carries over into the postwar period. The story is centered on a young widow, Barny (Emmanuelle Riva), a Communist whose late husband was Jewish and who struggles to spare their two young children from being deported to a concentration camp. Melville's depiction of wartime France is peerless: the brazenness of collaborators, the casual anti-Semitism, the presence of the swastika and of German street signs, the arrests and disappearances are presented with a harrowing simplicity. But the film's main drama concerns Barny's relationship with the handsome, brave, vigorous, and intellectual priest of the title (played with virility and verbal aplomb by Jean-Paul Belmondo), who seduces women's souls—and Barny's above all. Melville presents their relationship without irony, avoids any trace of satire, and, to make it the heart of his film, cut out (against the producers' wishes) an hour of footage about the Occupation. Melville films wartime with barely restrained passion, he films religious dialectics with remarkable but dispassionate skill, and he uses the story of Barny and Morin to skew the postwar political context—to reinforce the role of Catholics in the newly founded Fifth Republic and suppress that of Communists. In French, English, and German.—*R.B.* (Film Forum.)

MONSTERS VS. ALIENS

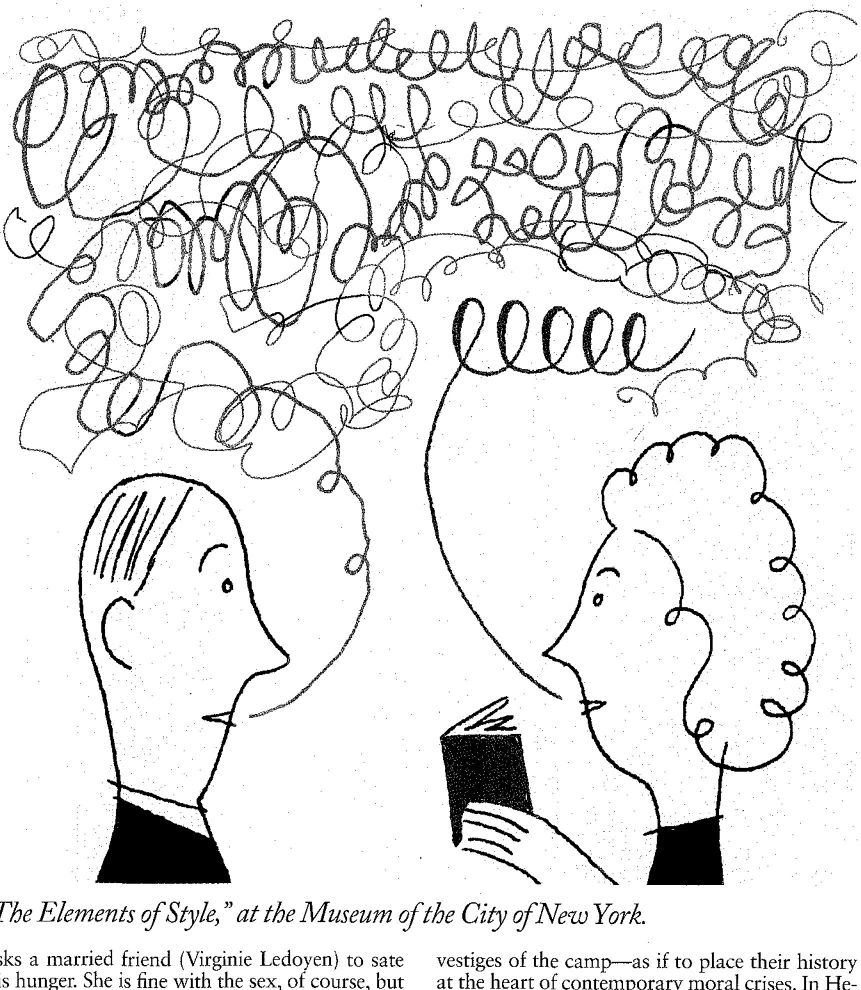
A new animated feature from DreamWorks, directed by Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon, in which a prospective bride (voiced by Reese Witherspoon) has her wedding day rudely interrupted by a falling meteorite. The impact leaves her as tall as the Chrysler Building, whereupon she is coöpted by the military and forced to join a squad of outlandish creatures, ranging from the politely inventive to the merely gelatinous, and voiced by Seth Rogen, Will Arnett, and Hugh Laurie. Their task, as you would expect, is to save the planet; this they proceed to do, against the threat of a dome-headed warmonger and his evil clones. There is little here that would not have crossed the minds of sci-fi enthusiasts in the nineteen-fifties, and, for all its digital novelty, the movie has the distinct air of a throwback. Still, it whips along briskly enough (even if the best gags, as ever, are in the trailer) and feels blessedly free of the in-jokes that have clogged up recent DreamWorks projects. Best seen in 3-D, if you can find the right theatre, though the extra dimension continues to seem less of an inspiration than a stunt.—*A.L.* (4/6/09) (In wide release.)

OBSERVE AND REPORT

Rancid and unpleasant "black comedy" about a stupid mall security guard (Seth Rogen) who has delusions of grandeur. It's the kind of movie in which everyone but the hero and a chaste innocent (Collette Wolfe) turns out to be rotten and corrupt, and the director keeps scoring off the hapless characters, as if nastiness were some new form of hip. It doesn't work: the jokes are just sour, the violence is miserably staged, and the actors, including Anna Faris, Ray Liotta, Michael Peña, and Celia Weston, get trashed. The plot is devoted to a chubby middle-aged flasher who terrorizes the mall. The movie's audience gets treated in much the same way as the flasher's victims. Written and directed by Jody Hill (a co-creator of the TV series "Eastbound & Down").—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

PARIS 36

In 1936, at the time of the Popular Front government of Léon Blum, a group of music-hall stagehands and performers (some talented, some not) occupy a defunct old theatre, the Chansonia, and try to run it themselves. Christophe Barratier's movie suffers from what can only be called creeping Baz Luhrmannism—a tendency to broaden and exaggerate everything to the point of nonsense. In this case, exaggeration is joined to a peculiar sentimentality: "Paris 36" is not so much a left-wing film as a film nostalgic for leftism. The characters are conceived according to the clichés of 1936. There is the brawling but good-hearted Communist stagehand (Clovis Cornillac) who struggles to keep the beautiful young *chansonnier* (Nora Arnezeder) from the disgusting embrace of a local landlord and crime boss. Surprise!—the crime boss turns out to be a prominent French Fascist. (Those were the days.) Some of the faded music-hall numbers are borderline entertaining; others are just awful—and are supposed to be awful, which makes you wonder why they are worth reviving. With Gérard Jugnot as Pigoil, the cuckolded stage manager and heart and soul of the theatre, an actor with a passing resemblance to Raimu, who played such salt-of-the-earth roles in the thirties. In French.—*D.D.* (In limited release.)



"The Elements of Style," at the Museum of the City of New York.

MARC ROSENTHAL

SHALL WE KISS?

A deft, restrained comedy from the French writer-director Emmanuel Mouret. Indeed, if it were any more restrained it wouldn't be a comedy at all. Mouret himself plays a love-starved Parisian, who asks a married friend (Virginie Ledoyen) to sate his hunger. She is fine with the sex, of course, but unhappy with the prospect of a kiss—that, according to the rules of engagement, is just going too far. Once the kiss has, like a crime, been committed, their lives unravel. The whole thing, a cautionary tale, is related by another woman to another man, who has similarly begged her for a smooch; one story keeps being put on hold for the other, and Mouret is undoubtedly skilled in the art of narrative balance. But the pale and cautious design of his movie, like the devoutly undemonstrative manner of his actors, has a strange effect on his theme; the wit begins to drain away, and with it any flow of desire. Only at the close does real passion return, unleashed by—what else?—a single, lingering kiss. In French.—*A.L.* (4/6/09) (In limited release.)

SOBIBOR, OCT. 14, 1943, 4 P.M.

In 1979, while making "Shoah," Claude Lanzmann interviewed Yehuda Lerner in Israel. A compact, animated man, then in his fifties, Lerner described an extraordinary experience: in 1943, while imprisoned at the Sobibor extermination camp, he took part in a plot to liberate the camp by killing its German officials. Lerner's account (which Lanzmann did not include in "Shoah" and reserved for this film) is as gripping as the greatest thrillers and as gratifying as any story of brave and cunning virtue confronting mighty evil. His detailed narration (as rendered in French by an interpreter) is as precise and evocative as a novelist's, his reflections are as profound as a philosopher's, and his gestures are the apotheosis of the Old World habit of talking with the hands: his physical evocation of the moment a death blow was delivered—as captured by the alert camerawork of Dominique Chapuis—is an unforgettable image of pure cinema. The two decades that lapsed between the interview and the completion of the film are brought to life in footage of the current-day sites of Lerner's struggle—from Warsaw and the forests of Belarus to the vestiges of the camp—as if to place their history at the heart of contemporary moral crises. In Hebrew and French. Released in 2001.—*R.B.* (YIVO; April 21.)

SUGAR

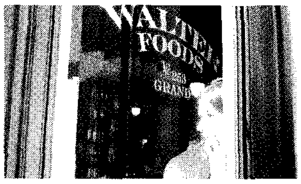
There is, certainly, a great movie to be made about a young baseball player from the islands or South America who enters an American-run baseball academy, gets a tryout with a minor-league franchise, suffers the cultural dislocations of American wealth and strangeness, and then, on the verge of success, hits a rock somewhere and capsizes before he can get to the majors. This film, alas, is no more than the template for such a movie. The writer-director team of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck want to overturn the usual triumphalist sports narrative, but the elements of their counter-narrative are sketched in without any particular conviction or strength. Algenis Perez Soto, as Miguel, the handsome and talented young Dominican pitcher, looks the part, but Miguel suffers nothing more than routine difficulties and setbacks. His pulling away from baseball is not determined by anything we see on-screen, and it feels like a misplaced cultural judgment—American capitalism, or something, did him in. Or are the filmmakers suggesting that Miguel is too hampered by guilt or vanity to succeed? Their message—that a good life can be had outside baseball—comes off as a dim and high-minded consolation prize. This is a tragic sports movie that shies away from every element of tragedy.—*D.D.* (In limited release.)

VALENTINO: THE LAST EMPEROR
The opulent life style and fabulous haute-couture fashions of the great designer Valentino are presented in all their splendor in this documentary by Matt Tyrnauer. The film covers Valentino's final two years at work before his retirement and the grand forty-fifth-anniversary party, in 2007, celebrating his fashions. The film isn't a biography; Tyrnauer simply follows the designer around and captures the moments. And, between the life beyond luxury (the Roman villa, the French château, the yacht, the skiing in Gstaad) and the workers in his showroom (including his prickly genius seamstress and her assistants, who dress in white when handling the beautiful fabrics), there's plenty to choose from. But the film's main focus is Valentino's forty-five years with his business and life partner, Giancarlo Giammetti, whose attentiveness and devotion to the designer are sincerely moving. It's a stirring relationship, and Tyrnauer's film catches what genuinely feels like the end of an era. By the time we get to the party, for which the Colosseum is bathed in blue light as a backdrop for wire-dancing acrobats dressed in Valentino red, the Felliniesque-ness of it all can bring tears to our eyes.—*Bruce Diones* (Film Forum.)

Also Playing

FAST & FURIOUS: In wide release. **KNOWING:** In wide release. **RACE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN:** In wide release. **12 ROUNDS:** In wide release.

TABLES FOR TWO
WALTER FOODS



253 Grand St., Brooklyn (718-387-8783)—Gone are the days when Williamsburg was defined by cheap, funky places like Oznot's Dish and Planet Thailand. As the Zeitgeist caught up with itself, waterfront glass towers were erected, artists were priced out of the neighborhood, and dressed-up joints like Dressler and DuMont, Hotel Delmano, and Marlow & Sons moved in. (This wasn't a bad thing, culinarily speaking, but it was more expensive.) And thus a couple of Manhattanites, Dylan Dodd (of Barrio Chino) and Danny Minch (a former Balthazar bartender), opened Walter Foods, part bistro, part old-school chophouse.

At the handsome bar, cordial gentlemen dole out an eclectic list of well-crafted classics such as the tropical cliché the Singapore Sling—a mix of gin, pineapple, and Luxardo, a maraschino liqueur—and a bourbon-heavy mint julep, just right. The bar is a fine place for a clever appetizer, like the pig in a blanket (chorizo wrapped in pastry) or the spot-on buffalo lollipop chicken wings. The dining-room ambience is pure New England, with its dark wood-beamed ceiling, antiquey prints of fishermen, and leather-cushioned booths, and the waiters, in their starched white aprons and bow ties, convey an air of formality that is propagated by the menu of the chef, Justin Ernsberger (Clinton Street Baking Company). One night, the raw bar offered pristine Beau Soleil, Hama Hama, Malpeque, and Blue Point oysters, king crab, and plump shrimp cocktail. But the clam chowder had a wan broth of buttered milk, and the blackened shrimp was oversalted. Lobster salad was luscious with avocado and hearts of palm but swimming in dressing, albeit a light, citrusy vinaigrette. The fried chicken, served with an addictive honey-chile dipping sauce, was too dark—"truculent, not succulent," said one diner—but a perfectly seared salmon fillet with French lentils and beurre blanc solved the mystery of why such a banal-sounding dish was on the specials board. The burger was distractingly smoky, inside an insufficient bun, but the filet mignon, with a decadent peppercorn-cream sauce, was charred to such perfection that it seemed to challenge Peter Luger, not far away, to a steak throwdown.

In spite of all the stiff-fronted decorum, the erstwhile Billyburg ethos seems to thrive. Amidst a dull Saturday-night roar, the urbane servers had, at times, an air of bewilderment; the clientele favored beards, T-shirts and jeans, tattoo sleeves. A young couple sat at the bar feeding each other: on one plate, the French dip ($18), on the other, surf and turf ($44). (Open daily for dinner and on Saturdays and Sundays for brunch. Entrées from $13 to $44.)

—*Shauna Lyon*

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—Special screening. April 15 at 7:30: "Booked for Safekeeping" (1961, George Stoney) and "The Cry for Help" (1962, Stoney). ♦ "Migrating Forms." For complete program information, visit www.migratingforms.org. April 15 and April 19 at 8: "Dialogues" (2009, Owen Land). ♦ April 16 at 7:45: "Impolex" (2009, Alex Ross Perry). ♦ April 17 at 7:45: "Goshagaoka" (2009, Sharon Lockhart). ♦ April 18 at 8: "Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo" (2009, Jessica Oreck). ♦ April 19 at 8: "The Earth Is Young" (2009, Michael Gitlin).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—Special screening. April 15 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Daisy Miller" (1974, Peter Bogdanovich). The 6:50 screening will be followed by a Q. & A. with Rita Charon and Maura Spiegel. ♦ Through April 28: "Winners of the Prix Louis Delluc." All films are in French. The 6:50 screenings on April 16-19 will be introduced by the film critic Michel Ciment. April 16 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Modern Life" (2008, Raymond Depardon). ♦ April 17 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Port of Shadows" (1938, Marcel Carné). ♦ April 18 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Les Choses de la Vie" (1969, Claude Sautet). ♦ April 19 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "À Nos Amours" (†). ♦ April 20 at 7 and 9:40: "La Guerre Est Finie" (1966, Alain Resnais). The 7 P.M. screening will be introduced by Ciment. ♦ April 21 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Rendez-Vous de Juillet" (1949, Jacques Becker).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Special screenings. "The Human Condition," a film by Masaki Kobayashi. In Japanese. April 15 at 2 and 7:30 and April 16 at 7:40: "Part III: A Soldier's Prayer" (1961). ♦ April 16 at noon: "Part I: No Greater Love" (1959). ♦ April 16 at 4: "Part II: Road to Eternity" (1960). ♦ In revival. April 17-23 at 1, 3:15, 5:30, 7:45, and 10: "Léon Morin, Priest" (†).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER
Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—Through April 30: The films of Satyajit Ray. All films are in Bengali. April 15 at 2, April 16 at 6:15, April 17 at 4 and 9, and April 18 at 1:45: "Pather Panchali" (1955). ♦ April 15 at 4:15 and April 18 at 4:10: "Aparajito" (1956). ♦ April 15 at 6:40 and April 16 at 6: "The Music Room" (1958). ♦ April 15 at 8:40 and April 18 at 6:30: "Apur Sansar" (1959). ♦ April 15 at 8:45: "The Philosopher's Stone" (1958). ♦ April 17 at 1:30 and 6:30, April 18 at 8:45, and April 20 at 3:30: "Charulata," a.k.a. "The Lonely Wife" (†). ♦ April 19 at 6: "Rabindranath Tagore" (1961) and "Two" (1965). ♦ April 19 at 7:45: "Three Daughters" (1961). ♦ April 20 at 9 and April 21 at 3:50: "Kanchenjungha" (1962). ♦ April 21 at 6:15: "The Goddess" (1960). ♦ April 21 at 8:15: "The Coward and the Holy Man" (1965).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through April 28: "Cinema According to Jackie Raynal." April 21 at 12:30, 4, and 7:30: "Autour de Jacques Baratier" (2003, Raynal; in French) and "Sweet and Sour" (1963, Baratier; in French).

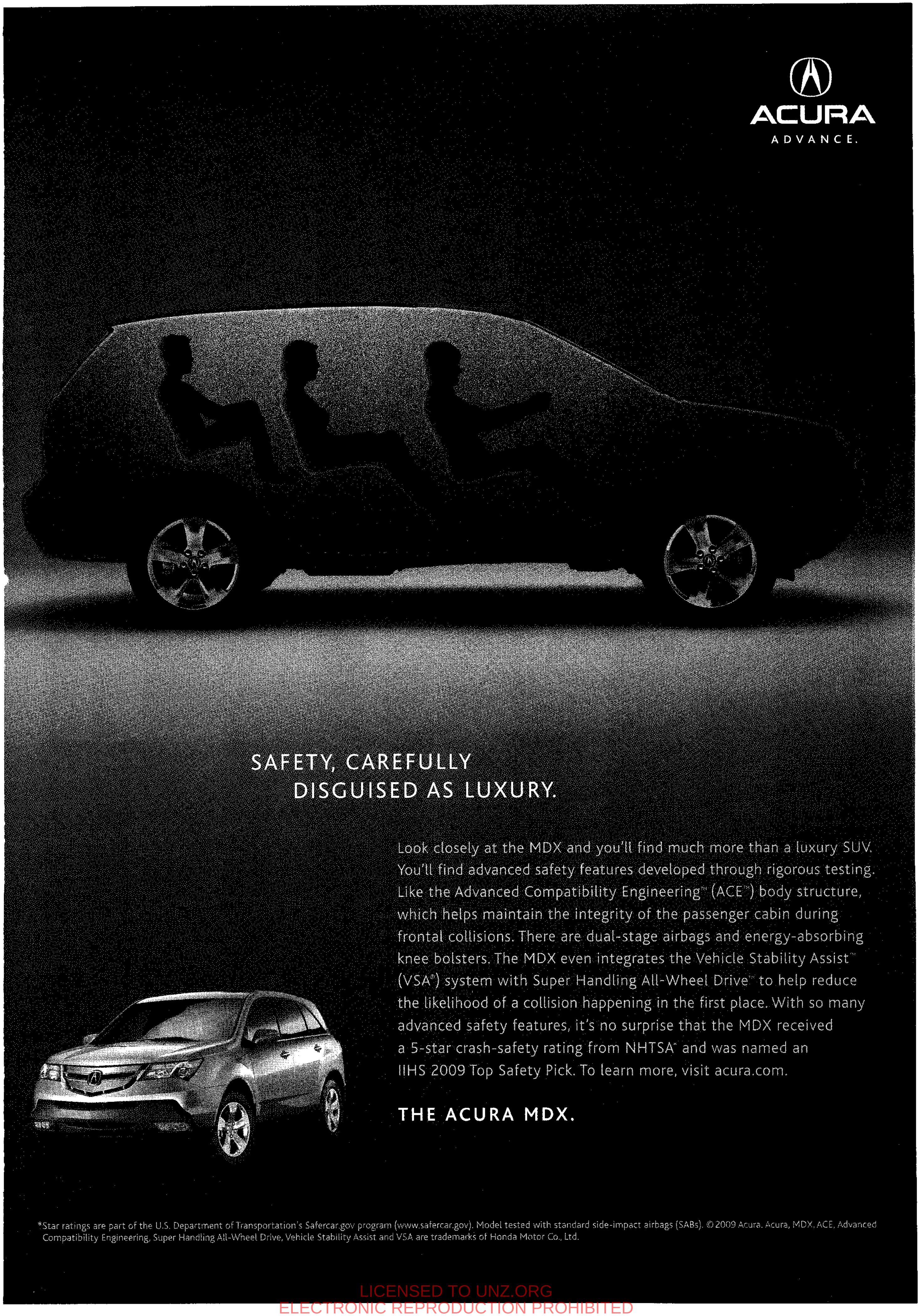
IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—In revival. April 17-19 at 11 A.M.: "The Earrings of Madame de . . ." (1952, Max Ophüls; in French). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." April 17-18: "The Holy Mountain" (1973, Alejandro Jodorowsky; in English and Spanish). ♦ Special screening. April 19 at 8: "Zero for Conduct" (1933, Jean Vigo; in French) and "On Dangerous Ground" (1952, Nicholas Ray), presented by the director Guy Maddin. ♦ "Stranger Than Fiction," a documentary series. April 21 at 8: "Native Land" (1942, Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand).

THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—Special event. April 17 at 7: "Gahan Wilson: Born Dead, Still Weird" (2007, Steven-Charles Jaffe), introduced by Wilson and the director.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—Through May 1: The films of Mike Nichols. April 15 at 8: "Carnal Knowledge" (1971). ♦ April 15 at 4:30 and April 17 at 8: "The Graduate" (1967). ♦ April 16 at 4:30 and April 18 at 5: "Primary Colors" (1998). ♦ April 16 at 8 and April 17 at 4:30: "Silkwood" (1983). ♦ April 18 at 2 and April 19 at 5:30: "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (1966). ♦ April 19 at 2:30 and April 20 at 8: "Postcards from the Edge" (1990). ♦ April 20 at 4:30: "Heartburn" (1986). ♦ Special event. April 18 at 8: A conversation with Mike Nichols.

YIVO
15 W. 16th St. (212-246-6080)—Through April 28: "Picturing the Shoah: Representations of the Holocaust in Cinema." April 21 at 7: "Sobibor, Oct. 14, 1943, 4 P.M." (†), followed by a discussion with the critic Stuart Klawans.

JESSIE WENDER



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READINGS AND TALKS

CUNY GRADUATE CENTER
The filmmaker and writer John Sayles reads from his forthcoming novel, "Some Time in the Sun." (Fifth Ave. at 34th St. For reservations, which are required, call 212-817-8215. April 15 at 6:30.)

CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
The high-wire artist Philippe Petit, who famously walked between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center thirty-five years ago this summer, talks about his adventures, following a screening of the documentary "Man on Wire." (Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 866-811-4111. April 15 at 7.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
The writers Barbara Wallraff, Roy Blount, Jr., and Roger Rosenblatt celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of "The Elements of Style," by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. (Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. 212-534-1672, ext. 3395. April 16 at 6:30.)

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS
The art historian Irving Sandler, who used to hang out at the Cedar Tavern in the fifties with Jackson Pollock et al., talks about local art icons from the postwar period. He'll be interviewed by the art critic Raphael Rubinstein. The painter Alex Katz will provide the introduction. (333 W. 23rd St. 212-592-2010. No tickets necessary. April 16 at 6:30.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Christian Bök, Nada Gordon, Kenneth Goldsmith, Sharon Mesmer, K. Silem Mohammad, Kim Rosenfield, Gary Sullivan, and Darren Wershler are poets who use technology and experimental strategies. They're performing in conjunction with the current Jenny Holzer exhibition, "Protect, Protect." (Madison Ave. at 75th St. 212-423-3500. April 17 at 7.)

"MUSIC FOR ALL SEASONS"
The Juilliard String Quartet, which has a new member (the violinist Nick Eanet), talks shop with the music writer and consultant Nancy Shear. (Steinway Hall, 109 W. 57th St. For more information, call 908-322-6300. April 20 at 6:30.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW
With Detroit's troubles dominating the news, it's hard to find the automobile romantic. But the annual auto show, which is at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center through April 19, is packed with bright examples of optimism—like the much heralded Chevrolet Volt, which will be on display. (Eleventh Ave. between 34th and 39th Sts. For more information, call 800-282-3336.)

"BIG APPLE GRAPPLE"
Shiny wheels are not the only thing to be found at the Javits Center this week. Bulging biceps will also be on display, as the world's top arm wrestlers (both male and female) gather to see who will be crowned New York City's King and Queen of Arms. (Eleventh Ave. between 34th and 39th Sts. April 18 at 12:30. For more information, visit www.nycarms.com.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
The people at the **SOFA** art fair (April 16-19) eschew the term "craft," with its connotations of humble, mud-spattered potters expressing themselves in basement workshops. Now it's all about "sculpture objects and functional art," which, at SOFA, means a little bit of everything—from spare, Asian-inspired chairs by Thomas Hucker to ecologically correct bamboo sculptures by the Japanese artist Honma Hideaki (whose work is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago). And there's pottery, too. (Park Avenue Armory, Park Ave. at 67th St. 800-563-7632.) ♦ The craft of winemaking—or is it an art?—is the focus of a sale at **Sotheby's** on April 18, notable for its wide selection of Burgundies, including the largest group of wines from the Domaine des Comtes Lafon ever offered by the house. It is followed by an auction of sumptuous furnishings—plus sculpture, ceramics, and silver—from the nineteenth century (April 20), led by a very grand Louis XVI-style gilt-bronze mahogany-and-marble chest of drawers, a *pièce unique* made during the Belle Époque by the cabinetmaker François Linke. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ **Christie's**, too, is up to its neck in European decorative objects, from furniture to tapestries and carpets, the subject of a general sale on April 16 and another on April 21 focussed more specifically on pieces from the nineteenth century. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ **Swann** will be selling a 1576 edition of St. Ignatius Loyola's "Exercitia Spiritualia," a set of spiritual workouts and prayers meant to put the Christian back on track to salvation, at its April 21 auction of early printed books. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

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"Séance on a Wet Afternoon," at City Opera.

JULIA MINAMATA

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
SPRING FLING
April 22–May 3

The Tribeca Film Festival is back with a host of premières and a handful of revivals. Among this year's offerings are Bradley Rust Gray's "The Exploding Girl," starring Zoë Kazan; "Newsmakers," a Russian remake of Johnnie To's thriller "Breaking News"; and "Yodok Stories," about former prisoners in a North Korean concentration camp who attempt to write a musical about their experiences. (646-502-5296.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
NEW MEDIUM
May 1-2

Stephen Schwartz's "Séance on a Wet Afternoon," based on the 1964 film about a psychic who kidnaps a child in a desperate bid for fame, is a highlight of New York City Opera's "Vox" series, an annual festival of new operas held at the Skirball Center. (www.vox-nyco.com.)

NIGHT LIFE
BRIGHT LIGHTS
May 3

David Byrne, Bon Iver, Dirty Projectors, Feist, My Brightest Diamond, the National, and other luminaries from the indie-rock world gather at Radio City Music Hall for "Dark Was the Night—Live," a benefit for the Red Hot Organization, an AIDS charity. (800-745-3000.)

THE THEATRE
BUTTONED UP
May 7

The film adaptation of Neil Gaiman's dark children's fable "Coraline" came out in February; now, at the Lucille Lortel, a musical version premières. "Coraline" has music and lyrics by Stephin Merritt, of the Magnetic Fields, and a book by David Greenspan. Jayne Houdyshell stars in the title role. (212-279-4200.)

ART
KEEPING THE FAITH
June 5–Sept. 6

Sufism, the mystical strain of Islam, arrives at the Brooklyn Museum in "Light of the Sufis." Twenty-four objects, from a thirteenth-century inlaid bronze candlestick to a contemporary glass book by the Brooklyn-based artist Kelly Driscoll, will be on view. (718-638-5000.)

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February 24, 2009

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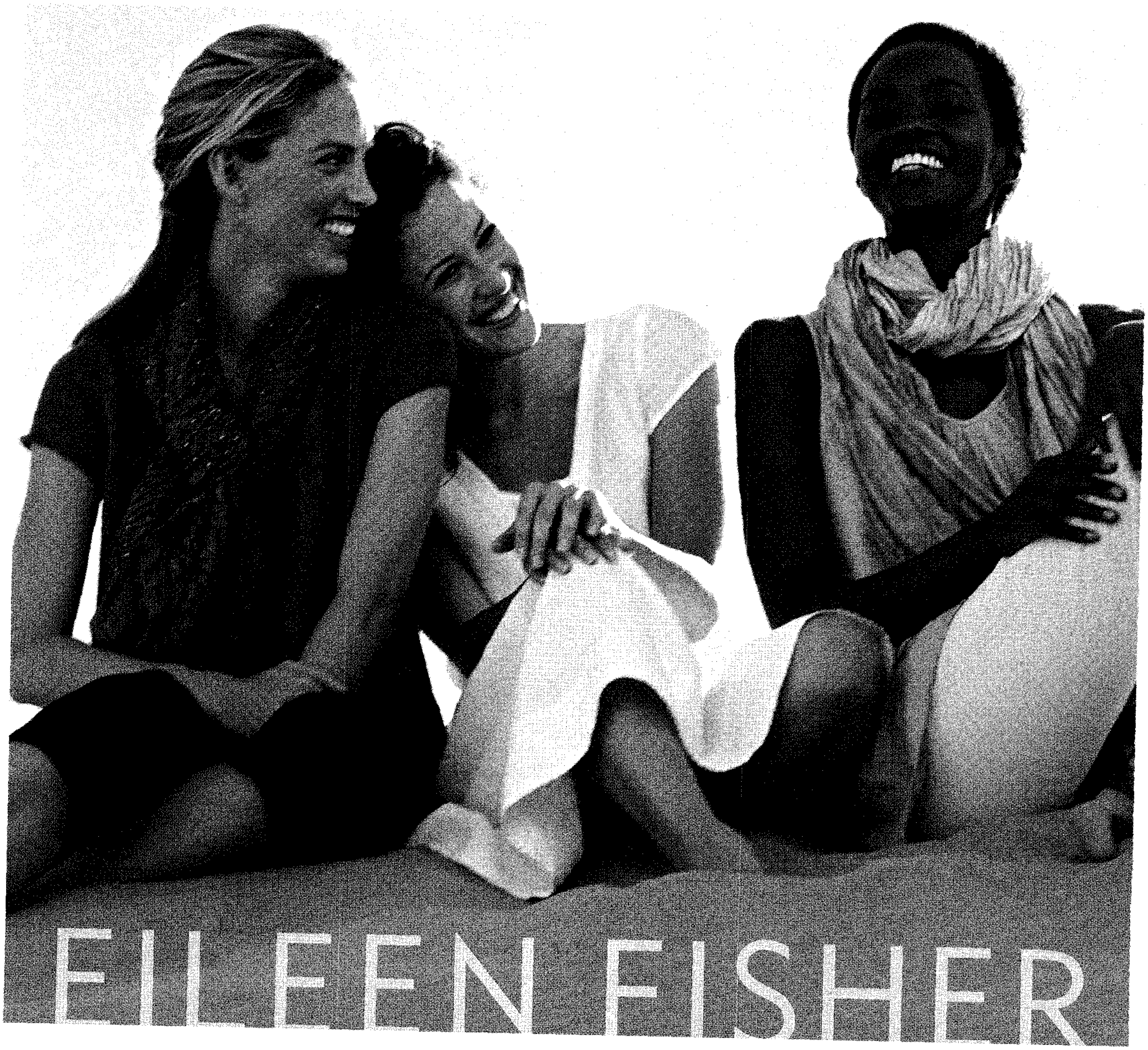
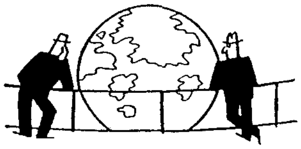

EILEEN FISHER

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

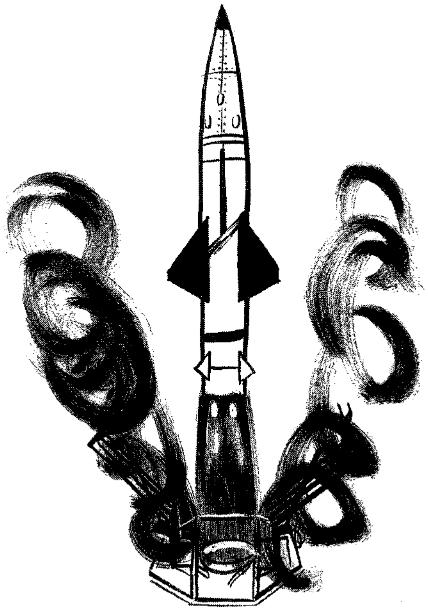
COMMENT
NO NUKES



There is no madness like nuclear madness. That was the conceit of the Cold War's greatest comedy, "Dr. Strangelove," and it was the conceit of North Korea's recent rocket-launch extravaganza. By testing a missile that might one day be able to reach Alaska, Kim Jong Il tried again to win the United States' attention by appearing to be barmy—a gambit aided by the fact that he almost certainly is. That his rocket fizzled over the Pacific seemed to offer only modest consolation, at a time when the nuclear smuggler A. Q. Khan is running his own Web site from Pakistan, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in Iran, is ramping up a reëlection campaign steeped in nuclear nationalism.

Along with two unfinished wars and economic freefall, President Barack Obama has inherited a less visible crisis, which may, in time, trump the others: the deterioration of the global nuclear-nonproliferation regime, which has lately reached its most fragile state of disrepair since the nineteen-eighties. At that time, South Africa became an undeclared nuclear-weapons power, and other newly industrialized nations (Taiwan, South Korea, Brazil, and Argentina, among them) quietly pursued hedging strategies that would allow them to build their own atomic weapons quickly, if they saw the need. Today, a similar but more dangerous competition—not yet an open nuclear-arms race, but a race for nuclear options—is gaining momentum in the Middle East.

Like many Israeli leaders, Iran's Arab neighbors fear that Tehran's drive to acquire nuclear weapons may now be irreversible. Some of these countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, possess weak militaries, big oil reserves, and congenital fears of Iranian aggression. They have recently announced plans to buy their own notionally peaceful nuclear capabilities—plans that might later provide a hedge to keep weapons options open, or to encourage the United States to shield them. A few years ago, Syria reportedly received a plutonium-production reactor from North Korea. (Israel, which already has a nuclear arsenal, destroyed the suspect facility in a bombing raid, in 2007.) Egypt, too, is discussing bids from nuclear-power companies. In all this lies the outline of a nightmare scenario, perhaps just ten or twenty years away—a crisscrossing regime of hair-trigger nuclear deterrence among unstable governments, some of which have collaborated with religiously motivated militias and terrorists.


TOM BACHTELL

President Obama appears to recognize the seriousness of these trends. On his inaugural trip abroad, he dedicated an important foreign-policy address—delivered in Prague's Hradcany Square—to the challenge of nuclear proliferation. Obama reaffirmed the obligation of the United States, as a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to seek, as he put it, "the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." He added:

> Some argue that the spread of these weapons cannot be stopped. . . . Such fatalism is a deadly adversary. For if we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable, then in some way we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable.

Ronald Reagan, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and Sam Nunn are among the Cold War-era defense hawks who have preceded Obama to an embrace of nuclear abolition. Even so, it is commonplace to criticize this vision as naïve, since the goal is unlikely to be achievable anytime soon. This criticism distorts the abolitionist movement's work; its supporters do not generally waste time on speculative debates about when and how a world containing precisely zero nuclear weapons might eventually be created. Instead, they want to drive down the world's nine nuclear arsenals to much smaller sizes as quickly as possible—perhaps to the tens or low hundreds of weapons, in the case of the United States—and, while doing so, to make nuclear weapons as illegitimate and impractical as possible.

For the time being, even cynical realists might recognize that Obama's endorsement of the goal of abolition enhances America's negotiating position within the nonproliferation system without imposing any practical constraints on American power. In fact, the Prague speech was not especially notable for its idealism; its significance lies in Obama's comprehensive, pragmatic accounting of the nuclear-diplomacy mess that he was handed by his predecessor.

The current disorder is hardly all the fault of the Bush Administration, which had a few successes in nonproliferation, such as the dismantling of Libya's fledgling nuclear program and the partial roll-up of the A. Q. Khan network. Yet George W. Bush and Dick Cheney disdained and undermined the international treaties and negotiations on which the nonproliferation regime is based. (Perhaps Iran, Syria, and North Korea would have accelerated their nuclear programs even if the United States had not invaded Iraq and announced a doctrine of preëmptive war; we'll never know.) What can be observed reliably is that since the late nineteen-nineties, when India and Pakistan tested bombs, the perceived value of acquiring nuclear weapons around the world has increased, the cost of rule breaking has declined, and none of this has evolved to America's benefit.

It may be impossible to prevent nuclear gridlock in the Middle East. Under an umbrella of Russian protection, Iran does not fear speeches. Still, it is inarguably in the United States' interests to employ aggressive and creative diplomacy to attempt to revise Tehran's perception of the costs and benefits of its nuclear program. Obama understands what is at stake: Iranian re-calcitrance, he said, could produce "a potential nuclear-arms race in the region that will increase insecurity for all." Last Wednesday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined a European-led initiative to re-start nuclear negotiations with Tehran. In a reversal of Bush Administration policy, she said that the United States would be a "full participant" in the talks.

The Obama Administration, in its early foreign-policy decisions, has sought to prioritize the most difficult problems in its in-box, and, in doing so, to define the hard facts and choices. This approach certainly describes Obama's foreign-policy review on Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was issued late last month. The review process bore down on the discouraging details of the revitalizing Taliban insurgency in a way that Bush and his perennially divided advisers never were able to do.

On April 5th, also as a result of a decision by the Obama Administration, television cameras recorded the arrival at Dover Air Force Base of a casket containing the remains of Staff Sergeant Phillip Myers, of Hopewell, Virginia, who was killed in Afghanistan. For the past eighteen years, the military has banned the media from witnessing the arrival home of a soldier killed overseas, even if the soldier's family wished otherwise. No more. These caskets, too, are Obama's inheritance. Gradually, the President is fashioning a turn in national-security policy—by insisting, first of all, on an end to denial.

—*Steve Coll*

THE TWEETS OF ROLAND HEDLEY

The following is an unedited transcript of the complete G-20 Summit coverage of Roland Hedley, senior Twitter correspondent for Fox News, who appears regularly in "Doonesbury":

At Dulles, on way to London for G-20 Summit. In taxi to airport, practiced my English accent on Irish cabdriver. Didn't go well. *12:15 P.M. Mar 30th*

En route U.K. Just re-upped membership in 1st class Mile High Club. O.K., I was by myself, but I was thinking of one of the flight attendants. *2:45 P.M. Mar 30th*

Disregard that last tweet from a staffer. *2:47 P.M. Mar 30th*

How bad is U.K. economy? My tailor is personally picking me up at Heathrow. Will post twitpix of swatches en route hotel for your input. *3:14 P.M. Mar 30th*

Plane diverted to Reykjavik for layover. Icelandic women heart-stoppingly hot. Downside: They're all living in their cars. *10:39 P.M. Mar 30th*

Idea for iPhone app: You launch it and YOUR GODDAM PLANE DOESN'T HAVE TO DROP 3,000 FEET TO AVOID MIDAIR COLLISION! I'd pay $2.99 for that. *7:31 A.M. Mar 31st*

London bracing for demos. Bankers told to come to work in jeans, which means they'll look like the anarchists. What's wrong with that plan? *11:03 A.M. Mar 31st*

Went to the Bank of England A.T.M. to test solvency, received ten sterling notes and head wound. Now @ Chelsea E.R., testing socialized medicine. *12:23 P.M. Apr 1st*

At E.R., watching E.R. chat up POTUS on telly. Mrs. POTUS blocking camera lights, her shadow plunging tiny Queen into darkness. Human eclipse. *1:51 P.M. Apr 1st*

No one here will accept payment for my sutures. I feel like I'm in a Cuban clinic, only without the humidity and livestock. *2:18 P.M. Apr 1st*

Theory: Maybe nobody ever WANTED to touch the Queen, starting with E.R.1, owing to cold-fish factor. To avoid embarrassment, protocol created. *9:13 A.M. Apr 2nd*

Think I'll stir the pot and report previous tweet as fact. We report, you decide. *9:14 A.M. Apr 2nd*

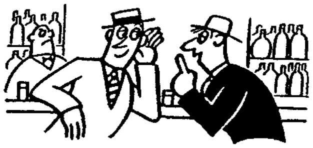
Breaking: Historically, nobody ever wanted to touch Queen owing to unattractiveness. To avoid embarrassment, protocol was created. *9:17 A.M. Apr 2nd*

O.K., so POTUS was BaRock Star Da Bomba at Summit presser. Yes, I know, I work for the other side, but he so was. *5:34 P.M. Apr 2nd*

Just for the record, in my storied career, I have touched 16 heads of state, all above the waist, and been detained only once. *6:03 P.M. Apr 2nd*

Handling pool tweets on Air Force One to Strasbourg in A.M. Need to steal something cool from plane for kids. Suggestions? *10:23 P.M. Apr 2nd*

THE SPORTING SCENE
THE COMEBACK



Vincent Cincotta—a.k.a. Jimmy the Peddler—was in the running to win the N.C.A.A. men's-basketball-tournament pool last week at his local watering hole, the Café on Clinton, in the Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn. What's significant about the Café on Clinton, where Jimmy used to be a regular, is that it isn't really a watering hole anymore. Two years ago, new management began running the place more as a restaurant, causing the bar regulars to dwindle. What's significant about Jimmy's being in the running for the bracket is that Jimmy is dead.

"Jimmy is very much missed," John McGill, the customer who oversees the pool, said last week, just before the first semifinal game. "And people are really excited that Jimmy might win."

The Clinton Street bracket is ten years old, although Jimmy had been drinking Dewar's-and-soda at the place since it opened, in 1988. Jimmy lived in the neighborhood his whole life; he was eighty-two when he died, in January. A death notice in the *Times* described him as the "last active horse and wagon peddler in N.Y.C." There is a photograph of his wagon at Jim and Andy's, the Court Street produce store where he was based after retiring his horse, in the seventies, and where he and his son Carmine took care of customers and restaurants, such as Frankies Spuntino.

When the first Clinton Street N.C.A.A. pool was drawn up, in 1999, it had six dozen regulars. Recently, a place selling really nice scones opened up next door, nice scones being a stake in the heart of a drinking establishment. Like the neighborhood bar scene, the pool has seen participation decline. This year, Jimmy was one of eight, the pot worth a hundred and forty dollars. It is the nature of smaller pools that the winner often becomes apparent well before the final game. By Saturday night, the night of the Final Four, Jimmy—listed in the pool as the King of Produce—seemed ready to clinch. McGill, who runs Two for the Pot, a nearby coffee-and-tea store, wrote on the official standings kept behind the bar, "The King of Produce will have an insurmountable lead if U.N.C. beats Villanova in the semis."

Another bracket regular is George Steele, a history teacher. On Saturday, he was remembering Jimmy's stories, about the neighborhood and the wider Brooklyn-related world, such as the one about Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford, and Joe Pepitone being taken out drinking by a couple of guys who planned to bet against the Yankees the following day, Mantle hitting home runs anyway. Steele believed that Jimmy had heard the story from Pepitone, who had worked for him as a boy, in the fifties. "He said that Pepitone's brothers were actually better ballplayers, but they had to go to work," Steele recalled.

It was Steele, in fact, who filled out Jimmy's bracket this year. That's because Steele always filled out Jimmy's bracket, even though Jimmy was an avid sports fan, known for faithful attendance at Yankee games.

B.O. appeared in press cabin. Your pool reporter was ready with tuff Q's, but POTUS hit him with high beams and he went stupid. Next time. *7:20 A.M. Apr 3rd*

Stole fire extinguisher from A.F.1. No W.H. logo, but I needed one for my boat. *8:20 A.M. Apr 3rd*

FLOTUS/Carla face-off? Come on. One went to Harvard Law, other slept with Donald Trump. No contest. Trump huge, even here. *3:05 P.M. Apr 4th*

POTUS date night in Prague. Snuck into restaurant dressed as fellow-diner but press tags slipped out of bustier. Off to woodshed. *8:30 P.M. Apr 5th*

Ankara. Bought chunk of hash for my oldest. Press bus went ape-shit. What the heck is "Midnight Express"? *10:17 A.M. Apr 6th*

Oh, THAT "Midnight Express." *10:19 A.M. Apr 6th*

O.K., ditched hash, planted it on *Le Monde* reporter. Thanks for caring, Tweeps, never got 80 direct messages before. *11:23 A.M. Apr 6th*

Proposal: World media mock N. Korea missile dud 24/7. Shamed Dear Leader shoots top scientists, crippling program for years. Flaws? *12:54 P.M. Apr 6th*

Miss quality time with kids. Quantity time not so much, cuz I can be pretty busy on Saturdays, when I get them. *4:07 P.M. Apr 6th*

I understand Blago doing Disney when he did. I went to Sea World when my Jag was repossessed. Times like those, always better to be in a happy place. *6:13 P.M. Apr 6th*

BTW, both kids nuts about Disney World. My sked too crazy to take them, but I love reading the brochures to them @ bedtime. *10:19 P.M. Apr 6th*

Landed Dulles. Good to be home. *7:32 A.M. Apr 7th*

En route to Baghdad to cover POTUS departure from same. Thanks for 12,000-mile head fake, Gibbs. *8:40 A.M. Apr 7th*

Descent into Baghdad is corkscrew death spiral through blinding sandstorm. Same vibe as second marriage. Tell ex thinking of her. *8:30 P.M. Apr 7th*

@ Camp Victory w. FLOTUS. Michelle rocking body armor, but no fashion face-off w. Mrs. Maliki, who may not even exist. *9:40 P.M. Apr 7th*

FLOTUS rips off Kevlar to show bare arms to 30 startled Iraqi schoolgirls bused in from Syrian refugee camp. *9:43 P.M. Apr 7th*

Chaperone looks aroused. *9:44 P.M. Apr 7th*

Baghdad. Awakened by huge blast in hotel lobby. Suicide bomber blows up complimentary breakfast buffet. Off to find bagel. *7:15 A.M. Apr 8th*

En route home. Thanks for following, Tweeps. Great thing about Twitter: all the gratification of being big enough to attract stalkers, none of the danger. *10:05 A.M. Apr 8th*

—*Garry Trudeau*

"He had no interest in college basketball," Steele said.

"Knew nothing," McGill said.

The first time Steele filled out Jimmy's bracket, he was hectored by a regular nicknamed Jimbo, a retired probation officer whose real name is Jim Hoffman. "Jimbo knows everything about college basketball," Steele said.

"He's just a sports guy," McGill said.

"So Jimbo is watching me fill out Jimmy's bracket," Steele said, "and I had Ohio State going to the Final Four, and Jimbo is saying that's crazy. So when I fill out my own bracket I pick Jimbo's team, to win."

"Jimmy won, going away," McGill said.

"After he won, Jimmy bought me a beer and insisted everyone call him Mr. Hoops," Steele said.

At that, a guy down the bar eating oysters called out, "I was in a couple, but I know even less than Jimmy."

"That's Alan," McGill said. "In the bracket, we all have nicknames, and he is known as the Deerslayer. I think he hit a deer with his car on the Taconic or somewhere."

A little after six on Saturday night, the first semifinal game started. Michigan State, facing the University of Connecticut, was ahead early. North Carolina was waiting to face Villanova next.

"If Carolina loses, Jimmy will be in second place, to the Snow Chief," McGill was saying. Snow Chief is a guy who used to sell road salt for a living.

Carmine Cincotta, Jimmy's son, walked in, having just closed the produce shop. "You know, Jimmy could win tonight," McGill told him.

"Do you know what this is?" Carmine said. "This is an Easter miracle!"

Everyone laughed, until somebody said, "Who would get the money?"

"I think I should get the money," Carmine said.

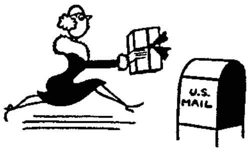
"No—if he wins, Jimmy buys everybody drinks," Steele said.

Around 7:40 P.M., the Michigan State/UConn game was tied. Couples were coming in for dinner, and Steele and McGill headed home. Michigan State won. At around nine-forty-five, McGill went back to have one more beer. He was the lone bracketer at the bar. North Carolina was winning. He asked the bartender for the pool standings and was handed a glassine sleeve, the first page showing the list of entrants. The King of Produce was on top. "It's over," McGill announced quietly. "Jimmy's won. That is incontrovertibly true."

—Robert Sullivan

SNAIL MAIL

A ROOSEVELT READING LIST



About a year and a half ago, Harriet Shapiro, who is the head of exhibitions at the New York Society Library, was, in the manner of modern-day researchers everywhere, randomly Googling—looking for information about Marion King, the institution's longtime librarian, who died in 1976. To Shapiro's surprise, a link came up to Harvard's Theodore Roosevelt collection, in which lay a cache of nearly six hundred letters written to King by Edith Kermit Roosevelt. "Mrs. Roosevelt destroyed a lot of her correspondence—she was a lady of another era," Shapiro said the other day, as she put the finishing touches on an exhibition about the letters which was about to open at the library. "So to find the entire correspondence is wonderful."

The letters spanned the period of Mrs. Roosevelt's widowhood, beginning in 1920, the year after Theodore Roosevelt died. In them, she requested books to be sent to her home, Sagamore Hill, near Oyster Bay. (Among the first works she asked for were volumes by Agatha Christie, Lytton Strachey, and a book about the botany of China, "On the Eaves of the World," by one Reginald Farrer.) The letters end in February, 1947, twenty months before Mrs. Roosevelt's death: "Don't forget to send me the Thackeray letters when they come home to roost" was her last literary request. The exhibit includes copies of some of the letters—the originals are still at Harvard—along with the original cards listing her borrowings, and a selection of the books that once did duty on her night table.

The letters show that Mrs. Roosevelt was an avid reader—she got through about four volumes a week—and had strong, if not always unerring, tastes. She dismissed much contemporary fiction, including John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath": "You know I can't read those long modern novels," she wrote to Mrs. King. She thought Walt Whitman "a second-rate poseur, tho' we forgive him much for 'My Captain' or 'Lilacs.' " Mark Twain was, in her view, "a vulgarian," and Thomas Mann "a great sham." She hated "Flaubert and Madame Bovary," Francis Steegmuller's much lauded biography of Gustave Flaubert, which she called "repulsive, most indecent." She did enjoy other biographies—they included Winston Churchill's "Marlborough: His Life and Times," which she judged "not heavy to read, but heavy to hold in my hand"—although of Edith Wharton's autobiography, "A Backward Glance," she wrote, "Mrs. Wharton made a good bedside book. I read it all, but somehow I didn't want to meet her friends." (So much for Henry James.) She relished murder mysteries, as long as "they had as little sex interest as possible." Her bedtime reading included such landmark works as "The Cairo Garter Murders" and "The Corpse with the Blue Cravat." (They "composed the mind for sleep," she wrote, disconcertingly.) A favorite author was Jane Austen, whose six novels she read and reread. "And she was attached to Trollope," Shapiro said. "She liked novels that placed things in a certain social order."

In keeping with the social order in which she had been brought up, Mrs. Roosevelt did not begin to address Marion King by her first name until eleven years into their correspondence; and when the letters stray into the territory of the personal their obliqueness is, in its own way, deeply revealing. After Kermit Roosevelt, the second of her four sons, killed himself, in 1943—the cause of death was reported to his mother as heart failure—Mrs. Roosevelt wrote, "I can scarcely understand what has come to us." Marion King, whose own distinguished forebears included Elihu Yale and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, seems to have observed the same social code. "She was rather like Mrs. Roosevelt, I think, with values of discretion, order, and integrity," Shapiro said. "I feel certain that Mrs. Roosevelt trusted Mrs. King, and she was right to." Of course, Mrs. King failed the First Lady in one crucial respect. "The only thing was that Mrs. King kept the letters," Shapiro added. "I am sure Mrs. Roosevelt would have preferred that she had destroyed them."

—Rebecca Mead

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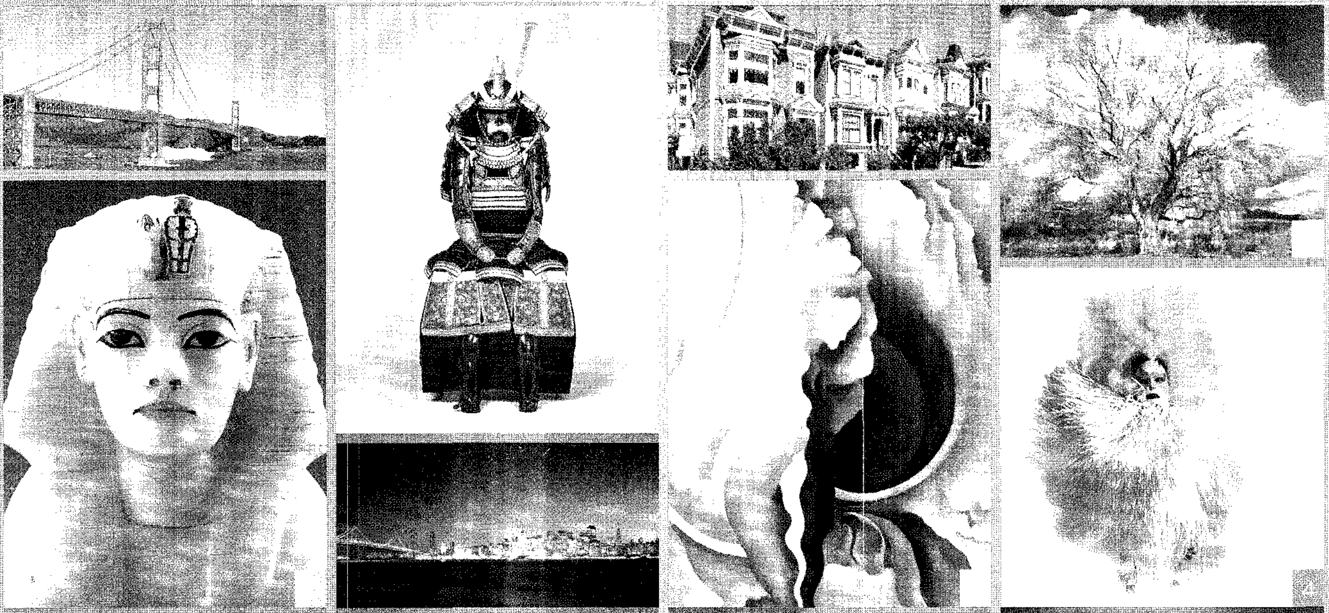
Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico/Out Back of Marie's II*, 1930; Collection of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, gift of The Burnett Foundation; © 2009 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. (Page two) Georgia O'Keeffe, *The Black Iris*, 1926; Georgia O'Keeffe Museum promised gift, The Burnett Foundation; © 2009 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS). New York. Ansel Adams, *Winter Sunrise, the Sierra Nevada from Lone Pine, California*, 1944; Collection of the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona; © 2009 The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. *Coffinette for the Viscera of Tutankhamun*, Dynasty 18, 39.5 x 10 cm. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo: Andreas F. Voegelin, Antikenmuseum Basel and Sammlung Ludwig. *Canopic Stopper of Tutankhamun*, Dynasty 18, 24 x 18.5 cm. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo: Andreas F. Voegelin, Antikenmuseum Basel and Sammlung Ludwig.

Take an **art exhibition experience in San Francisco.**



This summer, make a once-in-a-lifetime trip to San Francisco. You'll discover not only the city's world-renowned attractions, but a collection of museum exhibitions that is absolutely unparalleled.

1 From **June 27, 2009 - March 28, 2010**, the de Young Museum hosts *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs*. More than 3,000 years after Tutankhamun's reign, and 30 years after the original exhibition opened in San Francisco, this glorious event returns – with over 130 outstanding works from the famed Egyptian ruler's tomb and his royal court.

2 From **June 12 - September 20, 2009**, the Asian Art Museum welcomes *Lords of the Samurai*. Featuring 160 works from Japan, this exhibition of arms and armor, attire, paintings, tea ware, musical instruments and more will bring to life the spiritual and ethical code that governed every aspect of the samurai's storied existence.

3 From **May 30 - September 7, 2009**, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presents *Georgia O'Keeffe and Ansel Adams: Natural Affinities*. For the first time, over one hundred photographs and paintings by these two great artists will be combined into one extraordinary show – bringing to light the commonalities and differences shared by their distinctive visions of nature.

4 From **March 28 - October 18, 2009**, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts will be home to *Push Play*. This celebration of cross-genre arts will feature *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (March 28 – July 5), a collection of wearable sculptures, and *Wallworks* (July 18 – October 18), an interactive exhibition by six renowned artists painting on the walls of YBCA's Fumihiko Maki Galleries Building.

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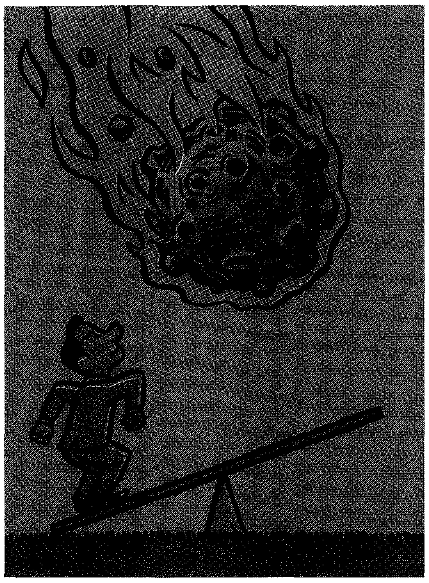
THE FINANCIAL PAGE
HANGING TOUGH

In the late nineteen-twenties, two companies—Kellogg and Post—dominated the market for packaged cereal. It was still a relatively new market: ready-to-eat cereal had been around for decades, but Americans didn't see it as a real alternative to oatmeal or cream of wheat until the twenties. So, when the Depression hit, no one knew what would happen to consumer demand. Post did the predictable thing: it reined in expenses and cut back on advertising. But Kellogg doubled its ad budget, moved aggressively into radio advertising, and heavily pushed its new cereal, Rice Krispies. (Snap, Crackle, and Pop first appeared in the thirties.) By 1933, even as the economy cratered, Kellogg's profits had risen almost thirty per cent and it had become what it remains today: the industry's dominant player.

You'd think that everyone would want to emulate Kellogg's success, but, when hard times hit, most companies end up behaving more like Post. They hunker down, cut spending, and wait for good times to return. They make fewer acquisitions, even though prices are cheaper. They cut advertising budgets. And often they invest less in research and development. They do all this to preserve what they have. But there's a trade-off: numerous studies have shown that companies that keep spending on acquisition, advertising, and R. & D. during recessions do significantly better than those which make big cuts. In 1927, the economist Roland Vaile found that firms that kept ad spending stable or increased it during the recession of 1921-22 saw their sales hold up significantly better than those which didn't. A study of advertising during the 1981-82 recession found that sales at firms that increased advertising or held steady grew precipitously in the next three years, compared with only slight increases at firms that had slashed their budgets. And a McKinsey study of the 1990-91 recession found that companies that remained market leaders or became serious challengers during the downturn had increased their acquisition, R. & D., and ad budgets, while companies at the bottom of the pile had reduced them.

One way to read these studies is simply that recessions make the strong stronger and the weak weaker, since the strong can afford to keep investing while the weak have to devote all their energies to staying afloat. But although deep pockets help in a downturn, recessions nonetheless create more opportunity for challengers, not less. When everyone is advertising, for instance, it's hard to separate yourself from the pack; when ads are scarcer, the returns on investment seem to rise. That may be why during the 1990-91 recession, according to a Bain & Company study, twice as many companies leaped from the bottom of their industries to the top as did so in the years before and after.



Chrysler's fortunes in the Great Depression are a classic instance of this. Chrysler had been the third player in the U.S. auto industry, behind G.M. and Ford. But early in the downturn it gave a big push to a new brand—Plymouth—targeted at the low end of the market, and by 1933 it had surpassed Ford to become North America's second-biggest automaker. On a smaller scale, Hyundai has made huge gains in market share this year, thanks to a hefty advertising budget and a guarantee to take back cars from owners who have lost their jobs. Those gains may turn out to be temporary, but in fact the benefits from recession investment are often surprisingly long-lived, with companies maintaining their gains in market share and sales well into economic recovery.

Why, then, are companies so quick to cut back when trouble hits? The answer has something to do with a famous distinction that the economist Frank Knight made between risk and uncertainty. Risk describes a situation where you have a sense of the range and likelihood of possible outcomes. Uncertainty describes a situation where it's not even clear what might happen, let alone how likely the possible outcomes are. Uncertainty is always a part of business, but in a recession it dominates everything else: no one's sure how long the downturn will last, how shoppers will react, whether we'll go back to the way things were before or see permanent changes in consumer behavior. So it's natural to focus on what you can control: minimizing losses and improving short-term results. And cutting spending is a good way of doing this; a major study, by the Strategic Planning Institute, of corporate behavior during the past thirty years found that reducing ad spending during recessions did improve companies' return on capital. It also meant, though, that they grew less quickly in the years following recessions than more free-spending competitors did. But for many companies recessions are a time when short-term considerations trump long-term potential.

This is not irrational. It's true that the uncertainty of recessions creates an opportunity for serious profits, and the historical record is full of companies that made successful gambles in hard times: Kraft introduced Miracle Whip in 1933 and saw it become America's best-selling dressing in six months; Texas Instruments brought out the transistor radio in the 1954 recession; Apple launched the iPod in 2001. Then again, the record is also full of forgotten companies that gambled and failed. The academics Peter Dickson and Joseph Giglierano have argued that companies have to worry about two kinds of failure: "sinking the boat" (wrecking the company by making a bad bet) or "missing the boat" (letting a great opportunity pass). Today, most companies are far more worried about sinking the boat than about missing it. That's why the opportunity to do what Kellogg did exists. That's also why it's so nerve-racking to try it.

—*James Surowiecki*

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

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OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

THE GHOST COURSE

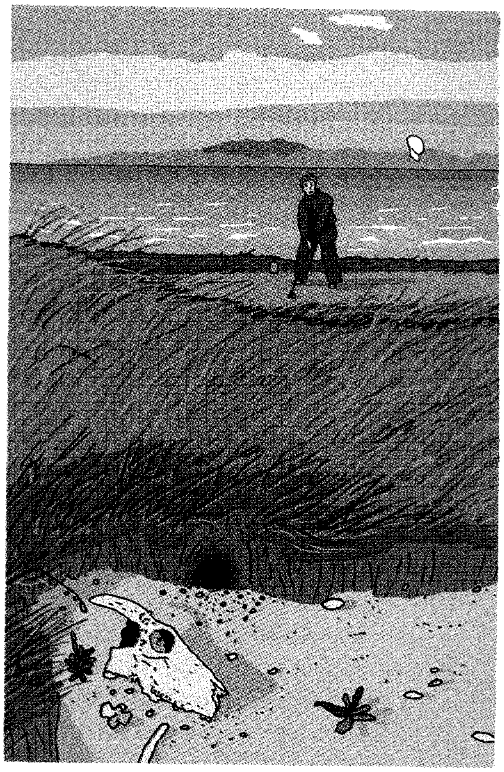
Links to the past on a Scottish island.

BY DAVID OWEN

In 2005, a Scottish golf-course consultant named Gordon Irvine took a fishing trip to South Uist, a sparsely populated island in the Outer Hebrides, fifty miles off Scotland's west coast. South Uist (pronounced YEW-ist) is about the size of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket combined. It is virtually treeless, and much of its eastern third is mountainous and uninhabited. Gales from the Atlantic strike it with such force that schoolchildren hope for "wind days." Irvine had approached the island's golf club, called Askernish, and offered to barter greenkeeping advice for the right to fish for trout and salmon in the lochs nearby, and the club had welcomed the free consultation. It had just nine holes and a few dozen members, and the golfers themselves mowed the greens, with a rusting gang mower pulled by a tractor. Irvine walked the course, in driving rain, with the club's chairman, Ralph Thompson, and several regulars, and then the group went to lunch at the Borrodale Hotel, a mile and a half down the road.

At lunch, one of the members surprised Irvine by saying that Askernish was more than a century old and had been designed by Old Tom Morris, a towering figure in the history and folklore of the game. Morris, who was born in 1821 and looked a little like Charles Darwin in an ivy cap, was the founding father of modern golf. In the eighteen-sixties, he won four of the first eight British Opens and became the head professional of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, serving there for four decades as the chief greenkeeper of the Old Course, golf's holiest ground. He also designed or redesigned several of the world's greatest courses, among them Muirfield, Prestwick, and Carnoustie, in Scotland, and Royal County Down, in Northern Ireland.

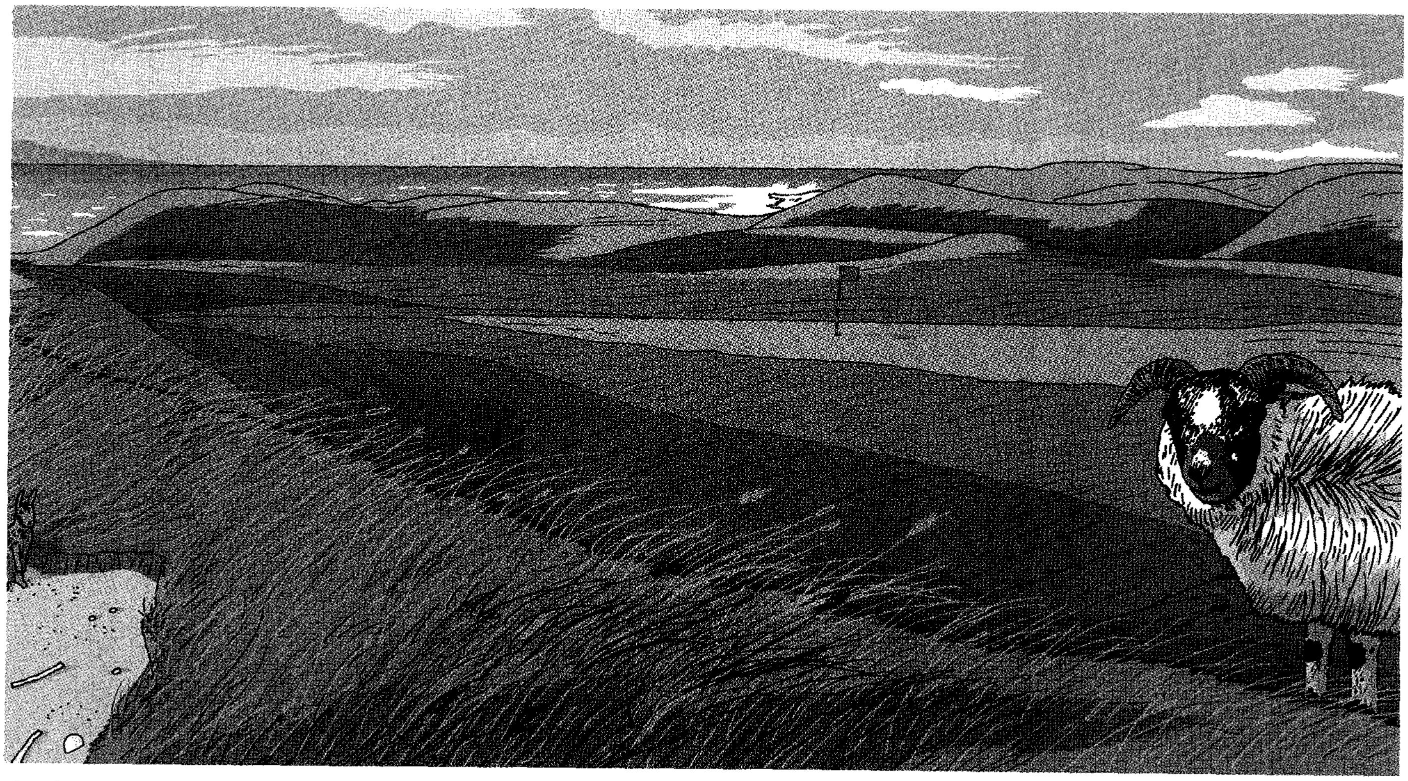
Irvine was polite but dismissive: the course he'd walked that morning was a cow pasture with flagsticks stuck in the ground, and he doubted that Morris, whose courses he knew well, had ever come near it. But another club member said that this was not the original Askernish, and that Old Tom's layout had had eighteen holes and was situated closer to the sea. Most of the original holes, apparently, had been abandoned, probably beginning around the time of the Second World War. Ralph Thompson said that the club possessed a news clipping from 1891 which described Morris's creation of the course that year, and which quoted Morris calling the layout "second to none." Irvine was curious enough to take another look, and after lunch Thompson drove him back.



A golf course's main design elements—fairways,

PETER ARKLE

This time, Thompson led him to a grassy dune at the western end of the seventh hole, and when Irvine climbed to the top and looked toward the Atlantic he saw a stretch of undulating linksland running along the ocean, between the beach and the existing holes. For Irvine, the experience was like lifting the corner of a yard-sale velvet painting and discovering a Rembrandt. There were no surviving signs of golf holes in the waving marram grass, but the terrain, which had been shaped by the wind into valleys, hollows, and meandering ridges, looked so spectacularly suited to the game that he no longer doubted the Morris connection. Despite the rain, Irvine could easily imagine greens and fairways among the dunes, and he told Thompson that, if the club's members would agree to work with him, he would donate his time and expertise, and help them restore their lost masterpiece. A resurrected Askernish, he said, would provide a unique window on the birth of the modern game.



bunkers, and greens—are synthetic analogues of features of the Scottish coastal linksland where the game was first played.

Not everyone on South Uist was pleased with this idea. The land in question had long been used as a common grazing area by local tenant farmers, called crofters, and a group of them protested that the construction of golf holes would violate their legal rights. One of the crofters described the golf project as a "land grab," and said that old property documents relating to the area made no mention of Old Tom Morris. For the aggrieved crofters, the plans brought to mind one of the most notorious periods of Scottish history, the Highland Clearances. Beginning in the eighteenth century, wealthy landlords gained possession of large sections of northern Scotland, which until then had been controlled by Gaelic-speaking clans. The new landlords attempted to impose what they viewed as economic rationality on their holdings, most of which were still farmed and grazed as they had been during the Dark Ages, by subsistence farmers working tiny plots. This transformation, which has been described as the wholesale substitution of sheep for people, involved waves of eviction, consolidation, and forced expatriation. By the late nineteenth century, the chieftains of the northern clans had either sold out to others or become landlords themselves, and the old Gaelic culture had been weakened or obliterated in many places, and sentimentalized elsewhere. A fad for kilts, tartans, and bagpipes took hold in the rest of the country, even as genuine Highlanders were being shipped off to Canada or put to work in the factories of Birmingham.

The Askernish project seemed, to the protesting crofters, like the clearances all over again. Ralph Thompson soon began to speak of making the restored Askernish—which the sportswriter John Garrity has described as a "ghost course"—the anchor of a much larger development, including additional golf courses and a hotel. He created a Web site and solicited nonresident life memberships, at twenty-five hundred pounds apiece, in the hope that fees from abroad would help to finance the construction. The crofters complained that the club's members were courting golf-playing "dandies" from the mainland and the United States, and were doing so at their expense. "What a cheek," one crofter said this past December. "They have gone on top of our grazing land and done with it what they want." The crofters began legal action to stop them.

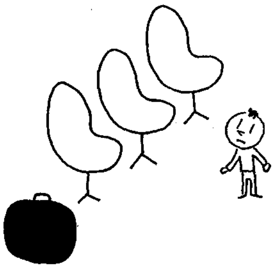
Getting to South Uist today isn't as hard as it was in 1891, when the sole option was a slow, unreliable steamer, but it still requires determination. When I visited the first time, in 2007, I flew from Inverness to Benbecula, one island to the north; South Uist doesn't have its own airport but is connected to Benbecula by a half-mile-long causeway. In the air, I looked down, through breaks in the clouds, on the fjord-like creases that rumple Scotland's west coast and on the waters of the Minch, the stormy channel that separates the Outer Hebrides from mainland Scotland. This past December, I visited again, taking a ferry from Oban, which is a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Glasgow, by way of Loch Lomond. The ferry sails three or four times a week and sometimes makes a brief stop at Barra, which has a tiny airport whose schedule depends on the tides, since the runway is a beach. The South Uist ferry passes Mull, Coll, Muck, Eigg, Rum, Sanday, Sandray, Vatersay, Hellisay, Gighay, and other small islands, and in good weather the trip takes about six and a half hours. Until 1974, cars had to be loaded and unloaded with a crane, like freight; nowadays, you drive on and drive off.

The first time I visited South Uist, Ralph Thompson, the Askernish chairman, came to meet me. He manages the island's main agricultural-supply store, which stocks sheep feed, onion sets, shotguns, and other local necessities. He was born on the mainland in 1955, but, as a child, he spent summers on South Uist, where his grandparents lived. One reason he liked those visits, he told me, was that he was allowed to go for weeks without bathing, because his grandparents' house, like almost all houses on the island at that time, had no running water.

Even today, South Uist is short on modern conveniences. The lights went out one afternoon as Thompson and I were having a beer in the bar at the Borrodale, and he began counting. When he got to "five," the lights came back on, and he said, "If you count to five and the power comes back, it means a swan hit the line." Later, we drove south on the island's main road—a single lane for most of its length, with frequent bump-outs for yielding to oncoming traffic and for overtaking sheep—and crossed a causeway to Eriskay, a smaller island. Thompson spotted, in the distance, a ferryboat approaching from Barra, and he pulled over to watch it. He wasn't expecting anyone, but there are so few activities on South Uist that residents have evolved an unusually low threshold of amusement. We watched the ferry for fifteen or twenty minutes, and didn't pull away until the last of a handful of departing passengers had boarded.

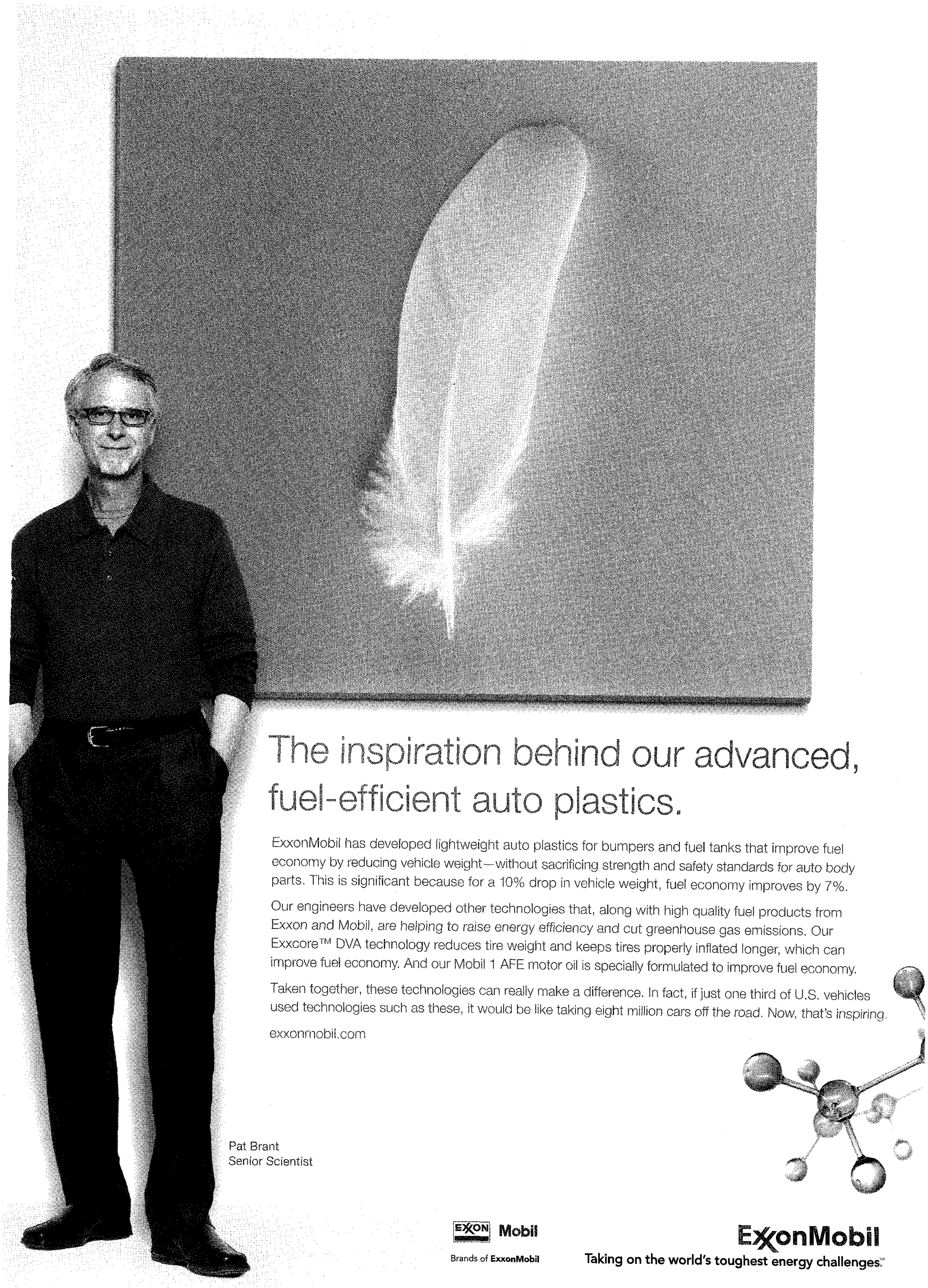
Sometimes, entertainment arrives on the island unexpectedly. Early in 1941, a freighter, the S.S. Politician, ran aground in the sandy shallows between South Uist and Eriskay. Its cargo included more than twenty thousand cases of whiskey, and, over several weeks, groups of islanders rowed to the wreck and made off with thousands of bottles. They hid the whiskey in cowsheds, rabbit holes, and lobster traps—and significant portions of the adult population of several Hebridean islands stayed drunk for weeks. In 1947, the Scottish novelist Compton Mackenzie wrote a fictionalized account of the wreck and its aftermath, called "Whisky Galore." Two years later, the book was made into a movie, filmed mostly on Barra. For its release in the United States, it was retitled "Tight Little Island"; too late, James Thurber suggested "Scotch on the Rocks."

Most people think of the word "links" as a synonym for golf course, but it's actually a geological term. Linksland is a specific type of sandy, wind-sculpted coastal terrain—the word comes from the Old English *hlinc*, "rising ground"—and in its authentic form it exists in only a few places on earth, the most famous of which are in Great Britain and Ireland. Linksland arose at the end of the most recent ice age, when the retreat of the northern glacial sheet, accompanied by changes in sea level, exposed sandy deposits and what had once been coastal shelves. Wind pushed the sand into dunes and rippling plains; ocean storms added more sand; and coarse grasses covered everything. Early Britons used linksland mainly for livestock grazing, since the ground closest to the sea was usually too starved and too exposed for growing crops. When significant numbers of Scotsmen became interested in smacking small balls with curved wooden sticks, as they first did in 1400 or so, the links was where they went (or were sent), perhaps because there they were in no one's way. On South Uist, linksland is called *machair*, a Gaelic word. It's pronounced "mocker," more or less, but with the two central consonants represented by what sounds like a clearing of the throat.



The major design elements of a modern golf course are the synthetic analogues of various existing features of those early Scottish playing fields, and the fact that golf arose so directly from a particular landscape helps explain why, more than any other mainstream sport, it remains a game with a Jerusalem: it was permanently shaped by the ground on which it was invented. Groomed fairways are the descendants of the well-grazed valleys between the old linksland dunes; bunkers began as sandy depressions worn through thin turf by livestock huddling against coastal gales; the first greens and teeing grounds were flattish, elevated areas whose relatively short grass—closely grazed by rabbits and other animals and stunted by the brutal weather—made them the logical places to begin and end holes. ("A rabbit's jawbone allows it to graze grass lower than a sheep," Gordon Irvine told me recently, "and both those animals can graze grass lower than a cow.")

On the great old courses in the British Isles, the most celebrated holes often owe more to serendipity and to the vicissitudes of animal husbandry than they do to picks and shovels, since in the early years course design was more nearly an act of imagination and discovery than of physical construction. One of Old Tom Morris's best-known holes, the fifth at Lahinch, in southwestern Ireland, is a short par 3 whose green is concealed behind a tall dune, so that the golfer's target is invisible from the tee—a feature that almost any contemporary architect would have eliminated with a bulldozer. The greatest hole on the Old Course at St. Andrews is often said to be the seventeenth, a long par 4 called the Road Hole, which violates a list of modern



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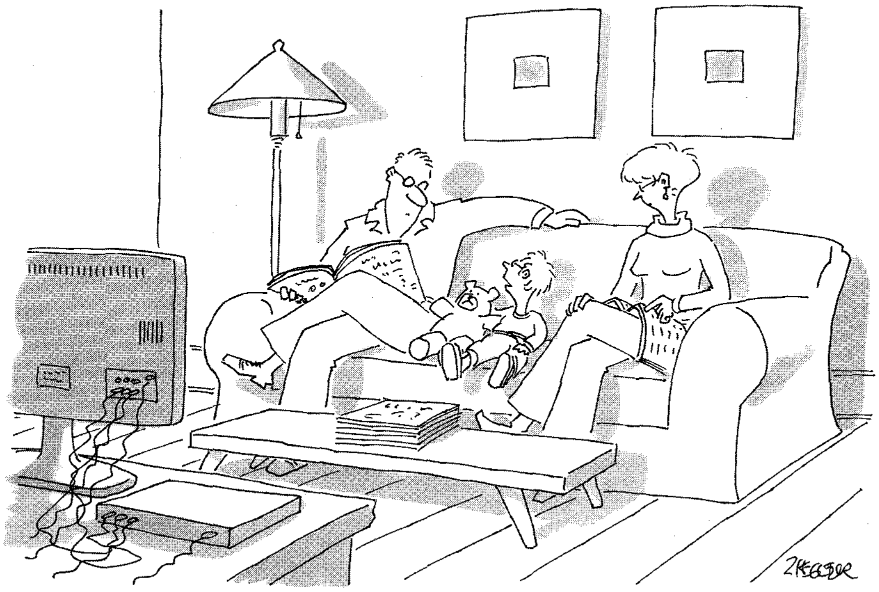


"Once this commercial is over, I'll have a number of questions on erectile dysfunction."

• •

design rules: the tee shot not only is blind but must be hit over the top of a tall wooden structure that reproduces the silhouette of a cluster of old railway sheds; the green repels approach shots from every direction and is fronted by a vortex-like circular bunker, from which the most prudent escape is often backward, away from the green; a paved public road runs directly alongside the green and is treated as a part of the course, meaning that golfers who play their way onto it must also play their way off. Over the centuries, every idiosyncratic inch of the Old Course has acquired, for the faithful, an almost numinous aura.

For Gordon Irvine, Askernish was in some ways an even more compelling historical artifact than the Old Course—so much so that shortly after his first visit to the course he called it "the holy grail." Unlike most other early links courses, Askernish had never been stretched to accommodate high-tech clubs and balls, and its original quirks had not been worn smooth, over the years, by motorized maintenance equipment. "Askernish was as Old Tom left it," Irvine told me. "Because the old holes were abandoned so early, there had been no real proactive maintenance done with machinery or chemicals, and it had never been revisited by other architects. The last time the old holes were played, the greens were probably cut with scythes."

In 2006, he enlisted the help of Martin Ebert, a golf architect whose specialty is links courses. No plan of Morris's Askernish layout was known to exist, so the men's first task was to identify eighteen likely green locations among the dunes. A round of golf consists of eighteen holes primarily because the Old Course ended up with that many in 1764, when four very short holes were combined to make two longer ones—although the number took a while to catch on. Prestwick, where the first dozen Opens were played, had twelve holes until 1883. Leith, where golf's first rule book was written, in 1744, had five. Montrose had twenty-five.

Finding a lost golf course isn't as simple as you might think: the creators of early layouts did so little in the way of earthmoving that unambiguous evidence of their work can be difficult to detect, even for someone who knows where to look. My home town, in northwestern Connecticut, had a small golf course in the eighteen-nineties, contemporary with Askernish. I know exactly where it was and have seen old photographs of it, but during a long afternoon spent tramping over the area I was unable to find a single undeniable surviving feature. In the earliest days of the game, golfers created courses the way children do when they knock balls around a vacant lot, by devising interesting ways to go from Point A to Point B.

Ebert developed his restoration design by hiking over the *machair* and visualizing golf shots (Old Tom's method) and by studying satellite photographs, which helped him weigh various schemes for connecting the greens in a logical sequence. He also extrapolated from his knowledge of Morris's designs elsewhere, and from his own work in restoring old links courses. When I visited Askernish in 2007, he and Irvine had placed eighteen flags in the ground, denoting provisional green locations, and were taking readings with a laser range finder and a handheld G.P.S. device, so that Ebert could enter accurate coördinates into his laptop—enabling him, among other things, to leave a clearer record of his thinking than Old Tom Morris did. Ebert told me that he and Irvine were fairly certain they had identified a number of the original greens, in some cases because the ground appeared to have been slightly flattened, most likely by hand, at some point in the past, and in other cases because particular formations simply looked like golf greens to them and so presumably would have looked like golf greens to Old Tom Morris, too. One such site—the fourteenth green in Ebert's layout—occupied a plateau surrounded by dunes, which resembled ocean billows. "That green plays well from many different directions, but I think it plays best the way we've laid it out, as a par 3," Ebert told me. "It just seems like a par-3 green, set high on the dune with everything dropping away."

While Ebert and Irvine worked, Ralph Thompson, a couple of his friends, and I followed along, hitting golf balls into the marram grass, and losing many. At one point, we all hit shots toward the top of a distant dune directly above the beach, so that Ebert could get a sense of whether it was reasonable to expect golfers to hit such a long shot to such a small target and into the prevailing wind. Putting wasn't really possible yet, although a few of the proposed greens had been encircled by single strands of barbed wire, to keep sheep and cattle from wandering onto them.

The most vocal opponents of the Askernish project have been Gilbert Walker and William Macdonald, both crofters. I went to see them this past December at Walker's house, down the street from the Borrodale Hotel. Walker, who is seventy, went upstairs to find his hearing aid, and Macdonald rolled a cigarette and took a seat near the hearth, so that he could blow his smoke toward the flue. Macdonald is fifty-four but looks and sounds at least ten years older. He apologized for his hair, which was pointing in several directions, and explained that he'd fallen asleep in his chair, at home, while waiting for Walker to pick him up. When Walker returned, I asked the men if they could explain crofting to me, and Macdonald smiled and said, "It is complicated."

Most of northern Scotland used to be occupied by clans, whose leaders had a conception of real estate which Macdonald likened to that of American Indians before the arrival of Europeans. "The clan chieftain did not regard himself as the owner," he said, relighting his cigarette, which had gone out. "He regarded himself as the chief of his people, and he considered his wealth in terms not of the number of acres he occupied but of the number of fighting men he had, or the number of cattle, or these things combined." Beginning around the time of Macbeth, the Scottish government (and, later, the British) increasingly viewed the northern clans as military, political, cultural, and religious threats, and took various steps against them. In the mid-eighteenth century, the rule of the clans began to be replaced by a modern system of land tenancy—the beginning of the clearances.

South Uist was bought in 1838 by Colonel John Gordon of Cluny, who lived in a castle on the other side of Scotland. Most of the island's residents spoke only Gaelic and subsisted by growing potatoes, raising cattle and sheep, fishing, and collecting seaweed for fertilizer. Their cottages, which they often shared with their animals, usually lacked chimneys; smoke from smoldering peat fires inside seeped out through thatched roofs. Colonel Gordon—whose name in historical accounts is often preceded by "heartless," "brutal," or some similarly grim epithet—eventually transported more than two thousand of these people, perhaps half of South Uist's population at the time, to Quebec, and consolidated their plots into large livestock farms, which were more profitable. His treatment of his tenants was among the reasons that the government acted, in the late nineteenth century, to bring the clearances to an end, by giving small tenant farmers protection from arbitrary removal. Crofters continued to pay rent to their landlords, but eventually gained many of the powers of ownership, including the ability to bequeath their crofting rights. The system, with various modifications, remains in place today.

After Colonel Gordon died, South Uist passed to his son and then to the son's widow, Lady Emily Gordon Cathcart. It was she who commissioned the first Askernish golf course, in 1891. A major golf boom was under way, and her decision to hire the most famous golfer of the day probably reflected a hope of attracting sportsmen from the mainland. When Old Tom Morris travelled to South Uist at her behest, he was accompanied by Horace Hutchinson, who was both a champion golfer and one of the first golf correspondents. An account of their trip, probably written by Hutchinson, appeared in *The Scotsman* and reported, "On a stretch of beautiful links ten miles in length it was difficult to select the best site for a course, as half-a-dozen courses, each having special points of interest, could have been marked off on the available ground. After a survey, a part of the farm of Askernish was selected, principally on account of its proximity to the excellent hotel at Lochboisdale, which at this season is usually crowded with anglers."

In 1922, most of Askernish Farm was divided among eleven tenants, one of whom was William Macdonald's grandfather. Each of the Askernish crofters received the permanent right to occupy a portion of the old farm and to graze animals on common land near the sea, while Lady Gordon Cathcart, who still owned the farm and the rest of the island, retained the manor house, a portion of the arable land, and the right to play golf on the *machair*.

The meaning of that last stipulation was central to the golf-course dispute. Macdonald told me that the golf provision, in his opinion, expired with Lady Gordon Cathcart's death, and that the crofters on her former property tolerated continued golf-playing only as a favor. He and Walker said that they had no issue with the old nine-hole course, which didn't extend into the dunes, but that the new course was an outrage. Walker, rising from his seat, said, "What they have now is four times the size of what was there. The whole *machair* is four hundred and thirty-seven acres. What they've taken over is three hundred and forty!"

In 2003, new legislation enabled communities in Scotland's crofting regions to collectively purchase the land they occupied. Three years later, the people of South Uist, Eriskay, and Benbecula paid £4.5 million for their islands, which are now owned and managed by a community-run nonprofit company called Stòras Uibhist—Gaelic for "the treasure of Uist." In 2006, Stòras Uibhist confirmed the decision of the previous owner to allow the golf club to restore the course—a decision that the Askernish crofters contested. The vice-chairman of Stòras Uibhist is Father Michael MacDonald, who is the priest of the Catholic parish at South Uist's northern end. When I asked him about the complaints, he shook his head. "I can't figure out what's behind it all," he said. "It's hugely expensive to go down this road. And for what benefit?"

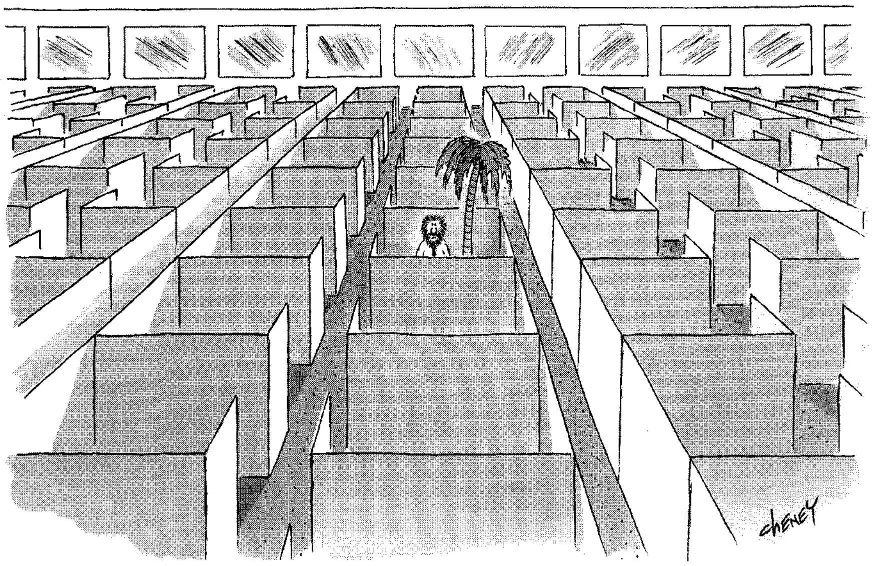
Walker's and Macdonald's objections to the golf course are less straightforward than they may seem: although each man has a croft at Askernish, Macdonald doesn't graze animals there, and Walker owns only a few. In addition, the people who run the golf club, far from asking anyone to remove livestock, have said repeatedly that they wish the crofters would graze more animals on the course. Hungry sheep and cattle are good for a links course, Irvine and Ebert told me, because they fertilize the soil and help keep the rough under control.

Part of the difficulty may lie with

crofting itself. Father MacDonald, when I asked, defined a croft as "a small piece of land surrounded by legislation." This is an old joke in Scotland, but it's apt. Crofting was devised to protect small tenant farmers from abusive landlords, but the system was already becoming an anachronism by the time it was put in place. The land on South Uist is so marginal and the plots are so small—an average of forty or fifty acres—that no one on the island today makes a living from crofting alone, despite substantial government grants and subsidies, and legally protected rents of less than a pound an acre. The system successfully preserves a sanitized form of medieval land tenancy, but it makes cost-effective agriculture impossible, since it divides the land among far too many tenants.

Perhaps for that reason, modern debates about crofting tend to focus more on symbols than on practicalities. The Askernish controversy has been portrayed as a class conflict, between struggling crofters and wealthy golfers, but the distinction makes no sense on South Uist, since virtually everyone on the island has at least one croft, including Ralph Thompson, the other local members of the golf club, and Father MacDonald. South Uist's economy—and therefore crofting itself—depends heavily on visitors from elsewhere, and has since at least the era of Lady Gordon Cathcart. Ralph Thompson has said that Askernish could eventually contribute as much as a million pounds a year to the local economy, a big deal on an island with a population of eighteen hundred and falling.

In early 2008, the protesting Askernish crofters asked the Lochmaddy Sheriff Court to halt the golf project. The court declined to intervene, and the crofters took their case to the Scottish Land Court, in Edinburgh. Meanwhile, construction of the golf course began. Actually, "construction" is the wrong word. At Askernish, Ebert and Irvine were determined to create golf holes the way Old Tom Morris and his contemporaries did, by doing virtually nothing beyond cutting the grass and filling in old rabbit burrows. (The 1891 article in *The Scotsman* about Askernish suggests that the first round of golf there was played within a few days of Morris's visit.) Modern golf-course designers usually work closely with contractors called shapers, who use heavy earthmoving equipment (and, often, explosives) to transform existing terrain to suit a designer's vision of what golf holes ought to be. For Askernish, Ebert didn't need a shaper, because he and Irvine intended to be no more aggressive than a nineteenth-century course builder would have been. Only a few small areas were subjected to more than trivial amounts of soil disturbance. One of those was the seventh green. Irvine and Ebert were both fairly certain that the seventh had been one of the original holes, because the valley in which it was situated looked so much like a fairway. But in what seemed to be the logical location for the green Irvine found virtually no organic matter beneath the grass. This led him to deduce that the old putting surface, if there was one, must be buried beneath six or seven decades' worth of windblown sand. He and a crew of local volunteers removed the beach grass from that spot and then raked away sand, looking for the original contours. A few feet down, they reached topsoil (or what passes for it on South Uist), confirming his hunch. Another green that required significant work was the eleventh—the target overlooking the sea which Ebert, in 2007, had asked several of us to hit shots to. Irvine and Ebert suspected that the original green (and most of the fairway leading up to it) had been lost to erosion, but they still wanted to use what remained of the dune, both because it formed an invitingly level plateau, and because the required shot, though challenging, had been so deeply appealing to all of us who had tried it. (Part of golf's addictiveness, for those who are hooked, arises from the thrill of effecting action at a distance—a form of satisfaction also known to anti-aircraft gunners.)



Ebert and Irvine used no pesticides or artificial fertilizers, and they didn't install an irrigation system. The entire cost of the golf-course construction was less than a hundred thousand pounds, a fraction of the usual bill for even a modest golf course nowadays. (Ebert helped to keep the price low by agreeing to work for Old Tom's fee, which was nine pounds.) Ebert told me, "Askernish goes back to the roots of the game, where you're just sort of playing across the landscape." Modern golf-course architects have individually recognizable styles, but most of them adhere to certain hole-design conventions: that golfers should be able to see their targets, that hazards and other obstacles should not be arbitrarily punitive, that fairways and greens should be shaped to reward good shots. In Old Tom Morris's era, a designer's main function was not to recontour the ground in order to conform to golfers' expectations but to direct play over existing terrain in thought-provoking ways, and to capitalize on lucky topographical accidents. Because Ebert and Irvine did their work at Askernish in that spirit, some of the holes pose challenges of a type that most modern players are unaccustomed to meeting. "Golfers who have only experienced modern courses will find some of the Askernish greens very, very difficult to understand," Irvine told me. "Some of them look as if they were sloping the wrong way, but that's only because we've got so used to pandering to the golfer." The sixteenth hole, called Old Tom's Pulpit, has an elevated green whose rear half falls off severely, into a sort of bowl, where many players' approach shots are likely to come to rest. The green breaks any number of design rules, but the hole is both memorable and fun to play, as well as challenging—just like Old Tom's blind par 3 at Lahinch.

The restored Askernish course opened officially on August 22, 2008. The retired Scottish soccer legend Kenny Dalglish played in the first group and was named the club's honorary president. Five months later, the Land Court heard two days' worth of testimony from the attorneys representing the protesting crofters and Stòras Uibhist, and in late February it issued a ruling. It affirmed Stòras Uibhist's right to create golf holes anywhere on the *machair*, as well as to build a clubhouse and make other improvements, while stipulating that the golf club must not deprive the crofters of the right to graze their animals adequately. (If the crofters and Stòras Uibhist can't settle the grazing details on their own, the Land Court will hold a hearing in May.) Ralph Thompson had told me beforehand that Stòras Uibhist's attorneys were confident they would prevail, but, even so, the scope of the ruling surprised him. "It's miles above what we expected," he said.

Crofting remains an important part of life on South Uist, and many residents, Father MacDonald among them, believe that it serves a critical social function, by enabling the island to sustain a larger full-time population than would otherwise be possible. But crofting, because it spreads residents so thinly across the settled parts of the island, also undermines any deep sense of community: most of the houses on South Uist are widely scattered rather than clustered in true villages. The golf club, which is open to all and costs very little to join, has the potential to become a community anchor, and its junior golf program, which the club and Stòras Uibhist have both treated as a priority, may keep at least a few of the island's young people interested in hanging around instead of pursuing careers on the mainland. At any rate, it will give them something interesting to do on weekends while they wait for their chance to escape.

I got to play a couple of rounds at Askernish in December. Even though the course is farther north than Sitka, Alaska, the Gulf Stream keeps temperatures on South Uist mild through most of the winter and creates the possibility of a twelve-month golf season, at least for diehards. I played one day with Ralph Thompson and Donald MacInnes, who is the club's captain, as well as a builder and a crofter. There was a film of frost on some of the beach grass when we began, but the sky was virtually cloudless, and I never needed the stocking cap that I had tucked in my golf bag. On the fifth hole, we passed a spot where an Askernish crofter had plowed a small potato plot up to the very edge of the fairway, most likely as a provocation. I expected Thompson to be angry, but he laughed. "We never would have got the course finished so fast if it hadn't been for the crofters," he said. "They turned Askernish into international news."

MacInnes had brought along his dog, which ran ahead of us over the dunes, pausing occasionally to enlarge a rabbit hole. The fairways and the greens were ungroomed, in comparison with a typical course at home, and we sometimes had to play around a rut or a bare spot or a half-buried skeleton of a sheep. But roughness is part of the course's charm. The bunkers looked like real hazards, rather than like oversized hotel ashtrays, and the slanting winter light made the beach grass glow. We were a little worried, when we began, that we wouldn't have time for eighteen holes, because the winter solstice was approaching and the sun had seemed to begin setting almost as soon as it came up. But we finished with visibility to spare, and had time for a beer in the tiny clubhouse, which MacInnes had built. We were able to play quickly because we had the golf course to ourselves, except for a few cows. ♦

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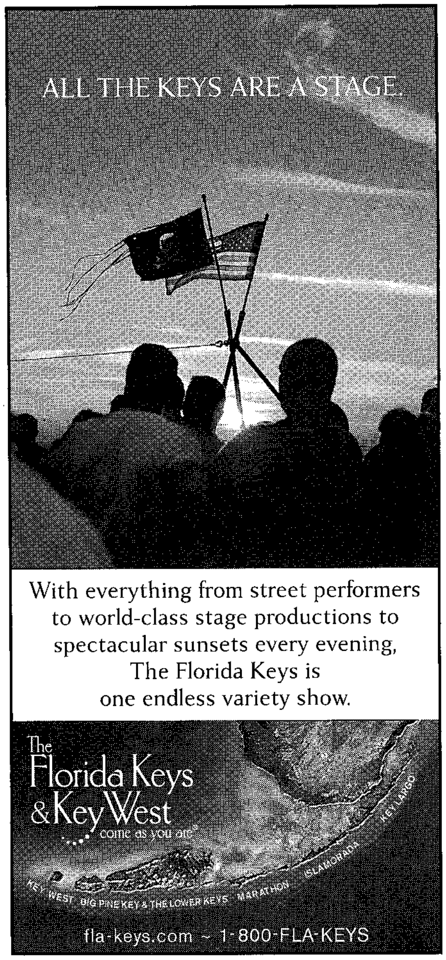
Slide show: David Owen at Askernish.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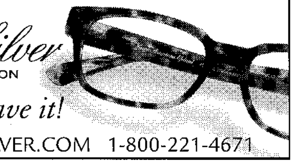

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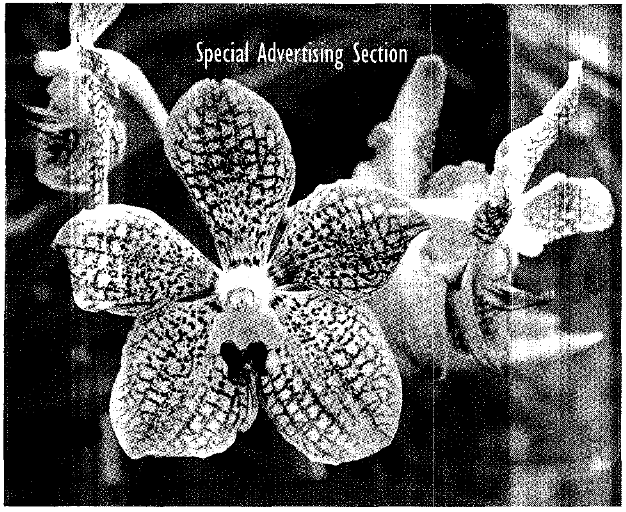

TOP, FROM LEFT: BLUE VANDA ORCHID ©LAWRENCE WEE; GOLDEN LANGUR MONKEY ©YATHIN KRISHNAPPA

SPIRIT OF INDIA
Paradise Explored

NESTLED IN THE HIMALAYAS between Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, Northeast India has been called the subcontinent's hidden jewel. Ethnically and topographically diverse—as well as physically isolated from the rest of India—the Northeast is endowed with exquisite natural beauty and uncommon flora and fauna that make it one of South Asia's most exotic eco-tourism destinations.

With terrain ranging from verdant river valleys up to the Himalayas, the region comprises the "seven sister" states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Assam, as well as Sikkim.

FINDING NATURE Bisected and nurtured by the 1,800-mile-long **Brahmaputra River**, the Northeast is home to multiple rare and endangered species. Both the lumbering one-horned rhino and the limber clouded leopard can be observed in **Kaziranga National Park**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and tiger reserve, along with elephants, wild boar, civets, and flocks of threatened and near-extinct birds.

Close to the Chinese border, 1,600-square-mile **Dibang** is one of few wildlife sanctuaries where visitors may encounter bushy-tailed red pandas. Eco-rich **Manas National Park** is another UNESCO site that has been designated an official tiger, elephant, and biosphere reserve.

Of the 1,600 orchid species known in India, the fertile Northeast boasts the highest concentration of the country's wild and cultivated flower. In **Arunachal Pradesh** alone—where an orchid festival takes place in Itanagar each January—550 species have been identified. Among them is the rarely seen blue vanda, which flourishes in **Namdapha**, one of India's largest national parks. Orchid fanciers and other nature lovers can trek through Arunachal Pradesh's **Sessa Orchid Sanctuary**. Routes marked along its rugged terrain show where some two hundred species grow.

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FINDING ADVENTURE Exhilarating adventures in the Northeast include canyoning and caving in **Meghalaya**, where the intrepid traverse "living bridges" woven of tree roots by local tribes. Rock climbers and mountaineers can reach for the heights in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and **Assam** surrounded by pine-covered hills and abundant waterfalls. And those who parasail or hang glide will find **Guwahati** in Assam a good jumping-off point. River cruises along the **Brahmaputra** enable passengers to observe nature from a ship's decks and then dock to explore local communities.

Gentle pursuits include touring the **Addabarie Tea Estate** (especially aromatic from March to May) in Assam; golfing on Meghalaya's lush eighteen-hole course in **Shillong**; and shopping. Pack an empty satchel or two for souvenirs and help support Northeast India's rich heritage of craftsmanship. Tribal jewelry made of bamboo, bone, silver, and gold by the people of Arunachal Pradesh; Assam silk from Guwahati's **Pan Bazar**; and traditional textiles hand-made at **Mizoram's Weaving Centre** can capture the essence of one's journey and become more precious with time.

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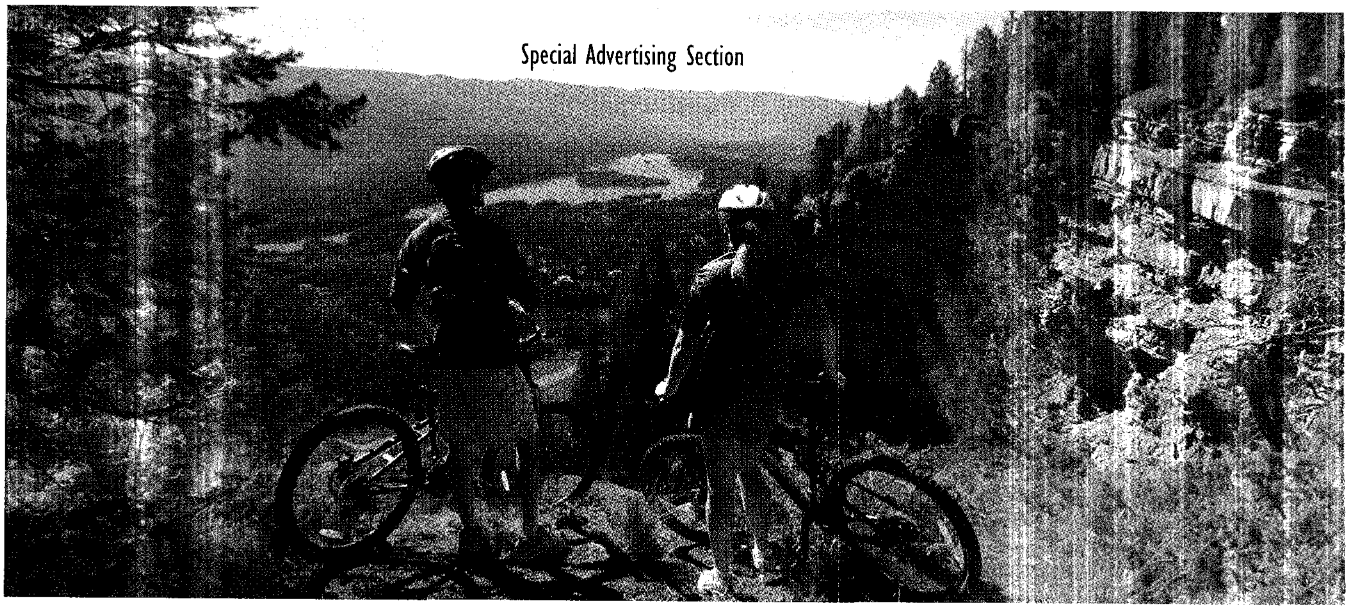

EXPLORE: COLORADO

Western Stimulus Package

IT'S NEARLY MIDNIGHT, APRIL 15th. Barry and Mona, a value-minded tax-accountant couple ("twice your returns for half the price"), add and subtract furiously, straining to file their clients' returns on time. It's been a nerve-wracking tax season; their energy supply is now in the red and depreciating fast.

Final seconds to go... A flurry of fingers blur over the computer keyboard. Mona lunges, jabs "Send." *Yesss!* The clock strikes midnight. *Made it!* Mona and Barry leap into the air and high-five each other. Suddenly, a blare of trumpets announces an animated screen pop-up. It's Ethel, the CPA Fairy Godmother! The duo has won a designer vacation!

"Tell me your dream holiday wishes, kiddos," says Ethel, "and I will put together for you a revitalizing package."

Slightly incredulous, Barry's grin widens like a spreadsheet. "O.K., I want rafting and canoeing. And fly-fishing. And adventure sports..." Ethel taps her mouse. "It's good to not live only by the numbers." From the computer stream 3-D images of churning white water on a river near Fort Collins, one near Salida, and another near Glenwood Springs. Barry is dripping wet. (He towels off and wonders where the orange life jacket on the floor came from.)

"I'd love winery tours!" shouts Mona. "Wine not?" Ethel winks, clicking her calculator. A Grand Junction tasting bar materializes, displaying rows of Merlots, Chardonnays, and Cabernets. Mona and Barry lick their lips, feeling a little light-headed.

"Our vacation plus column must also include mountain biking," proclaims Barry. Ethel presses "ESC" and the three are instantly perched on a sun-dazzled, majestic, 9,300-foot mountain peak. "This is Crested Butte, the birthplace for all that," she says. Mona nods, taking large, open-mouthed gulps of crisp, fresh air. "Marvel-lous," she gasps. "And, in addition, I think our pleasures would multiply if we could hike, bird-watch, and camp."

"Those will accrue here," certifies Ethel, hitting the option key to envelop them in acres of sweet-smelling Rocky Mountain National Park terrain. "Nature is great," says Barry, inhaling. "But I wouldn't mind soaking in natural springs and spas and steeping myself in culture—art galleries and museums—and dining in gourmet restaurants, too."

"Excellent balance-sheeting," says Ethel, selecting the shift key and crediting them with images of Telluride's Blues and Brews Festival, the Denver Art Museum, and gleaming buildings filled with fabulous shopping throughout the city.

"What an awesome stimulus package!" Mona enthuses. "You completely fulfill our vacation fantasies! But these debits will surely soar higher than our budget," says Barry, adding quickly in his head. "Plus, it wouldn't be right for economy-conscious accountants to indulge in deficit spending at such a time."

"Not to worry," says Ethel. "It's not for nothing I'm your CPA Fairy Godmother. These travel attractions are high altitude, yes, but the cost is strictly sea level. I give you great value, too."

But where could we find all these amazing experiences in one place?" the accountants wonder. "*In heaven?*" "Very nearly," Ethel smiles. She points to her MultiBerry and COLORADO.COM appears on the screen. "You'll find everything you want right there. You could even make your own reservations. (Although, if you like"—she lowers her voice—"I'll do your bookings myself. You know, make a little commission on the side. It couldn't hurt.")

Mona and Barry are happily in balance again. Lots of net gain here. "It all adds up," says Mona. "It figures," adds Barry. "Colorado is a change of scene we can all believe in."

Mort Gerberg's recent "Last Laughs" *collection was published by Scribner.*

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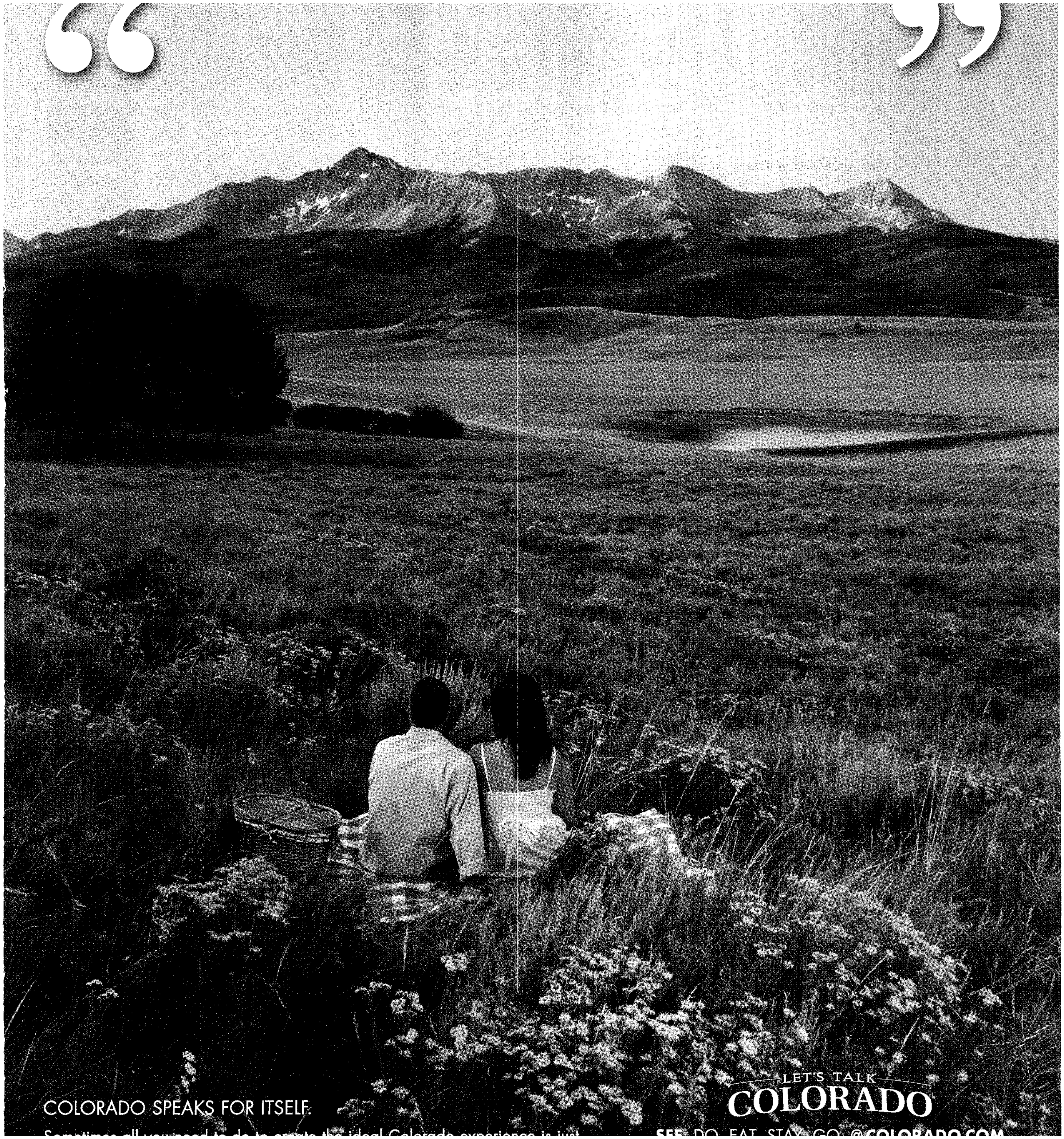
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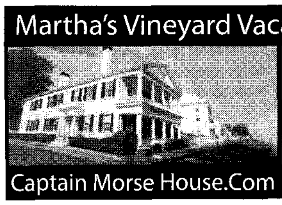

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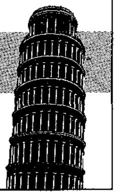

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REFLECTIONS

GUY WALKS INTO A BAR CAR

Lost loves and lost years.

BY DAVID SEDARIS

In the golden age of American travel, the platforms of train stations were knee deep in what looked like fog. You see it all the time in black-and-white movies, these low-lying eddies of silver. I always thought it was steam from the engines, but now I wonder if it didn't come from cigarettes. You could smoke everywhere back then: in the dining car, in your sleeping berth. Depending on your preference, it was either absolute Heaven or absolute Hell.

I know there was a smoking car on the Amtrak I took from Raleigh to Chicago in 1984, but seven years later it was gone. By then if you wanted a cigarette your only option was to head for the bar. It sounds all right in passing, romantic even—"the bar on the Lake Shore Limited"—but in fact it was rather depressing. Too bright, too loud, and full of alcoholics who commandeered the seats immediately after boarding and remained there, marinating like cheap kebabs, until they reached their destinations. At first, their voices might strike you as jolly: the warm tones of strangers becoming friends. Then the drinkers would get sloppy and repetitive, settling, finally, on that cross-eyed mush that passes for alcoholic sincerity.

On the train I took from New York to Chicago in early January of 1991, one of the drunks pulled down his pants and shook his bare bottom at the woman behind the bar. I was thirty-four, old enough to know better, yet I laughed along with everyone else. The trip was interminable—almost nineteen hours, not counting any delays—but nothing short of a derailment could have soured my good mood. I was off to see the boyfriend I'd left behind when I moved to New York. We'd known each other for six years, and though we'd broken up more times than either of us could count, there was the hope that this visit might reunite us. Then he'd join me for a fresh start in Manhattan, and all our problems would disappear.

It was best for both of us that it didn't work out that way, though of course I couldn't see it at the time. The trip designed to bring us back together tore us apart for good, and it was a considerably sorrier me that boarded the Limited back to New York. My train left Union Station in the early evening. The late-January sky was the color of pewter, and the ground beneath it—as flat as rolled-out dough—was glazed with slush. I watched as the city receded into the distance, and then I went to the bar car for a cigarette. Of the dozen or so drunks who'd staggered on board in Chicago, one in particular stood out. I've always had an eye for ruined-looking men, and that's what attracted me to this guy—I'll call him Johnny Ryan—the sense that he'd been kicked around. By the time he hit thirty, a hardness would likely settle about his mouth and eyes, but as it was—at twenty-nine—he was right on the edge, a screw-top bottle of wine the day before it turns to vinegar.

It must have been he who started the conversation, as I'd never have had the nerve. Under different circumstances, I might have stammered hello and run back to my seat, but my breakup convinced me that something major was about to happen. The chance of a lifetime was coming my way, and in order to accept it I needed to loosen up, to stop being so "rigid." That was what my former boyfriend had called me. He'd thrown in "judgmental" while he was at it, another of those synonyms for "no fun at all." The fact that it stung reaffirmed what I had always suspected: it was all true. No one was duller, more prudish and set in his ways, than I was.

Johnny didn't strike me as gay, but it was hard to tell with alcoholics. Like prisoners and shepherds, many of them didn't care who they had sex with, the idea being that what happens in the dark stays in the dark. It's the next morning you have to worry about—the name-calling, the slamming of doors, the charge that you somehow cast a spell. I must have been desperate to think that such a person would lead me to a new life. Not that Johnny was bad company—it's just that the things we had in common were all so depressing. Unemployment, for instance. My last job had been as an elf at Macy's.

"Personal assistant" was how I phrased it, hoping he wouldn't ask for whom.

"Uh—Santa?"

His last job had involved hazardous chemicals. An accident at Thanksgiving had caused boils to rise on his back. A few months before that, a tankard of spilled benzene had burned all the hair off his arms and hands. This only made him more attractive. I imagined those smooth pink mitts of his opening the door to the rest of my life.

"So are you just going to stand here smoking all night?" he asked.

Normally, I waited until nine o'clock to start drinking, but "What the heck," I said. "I'll have a beer. Why not?" When a couple of seats opened up, Johnny and I took them. Across the narrow carriage, a black man with a bushy mustache pounded on the Formica tabletop. "So a nun goes into town," he said, "and sees a sign reading, 'Quickies—Twenty-five Dollars.' Not sure what it means, she walks back to the convent and pulls aside the mother superior. 'Excuse me,' she asks, 'but what's a quickie?'

"And the old lady goes, 'Twenty-five dollars. Just like in town.' "

As the car filled with laughter, Johnny lit a fresh cigarette. "Some comedian," he said. I don't know how we got onto the subject of gambling—perhaps I asked if he had a hobby.

"I'll bet on sporting events, on horses and greyhounds—hell, put two fleas on the table and I'll bet over which one can jump the highest. How about you?"

Gambling to me is what a telephone pole might be to a groundhog. He sees that it's there but doesn't for the life of him understand why. Friends have tried to explain the appeal, but still I don't get it. Why take chances with money?

Johnny had gone to Gamblers Anonymous, but the whining got on his nerves, and he quit after his third meeting. Now, he confessed, he was on his way to Atlantic City, where he hoped to clean up at the blackjack tables.

ZOHAR LAZAR

"All right," called the black man on the other side of the carriage. "I've got another one. What do you have if you have nuts on a wall?" He lit a cigarette and blew out the match. "Walnuts!"

A red-nosed woman in a decorative sweatshirt started to talk, but the black fellow told her that he wasn't done yet. "What do you have if you have nuts on your chest?" He waited a beat. "Chestnuts! What do you have when you have nuts on your chin?" He looked from face to face. "A dick in your mouth!"

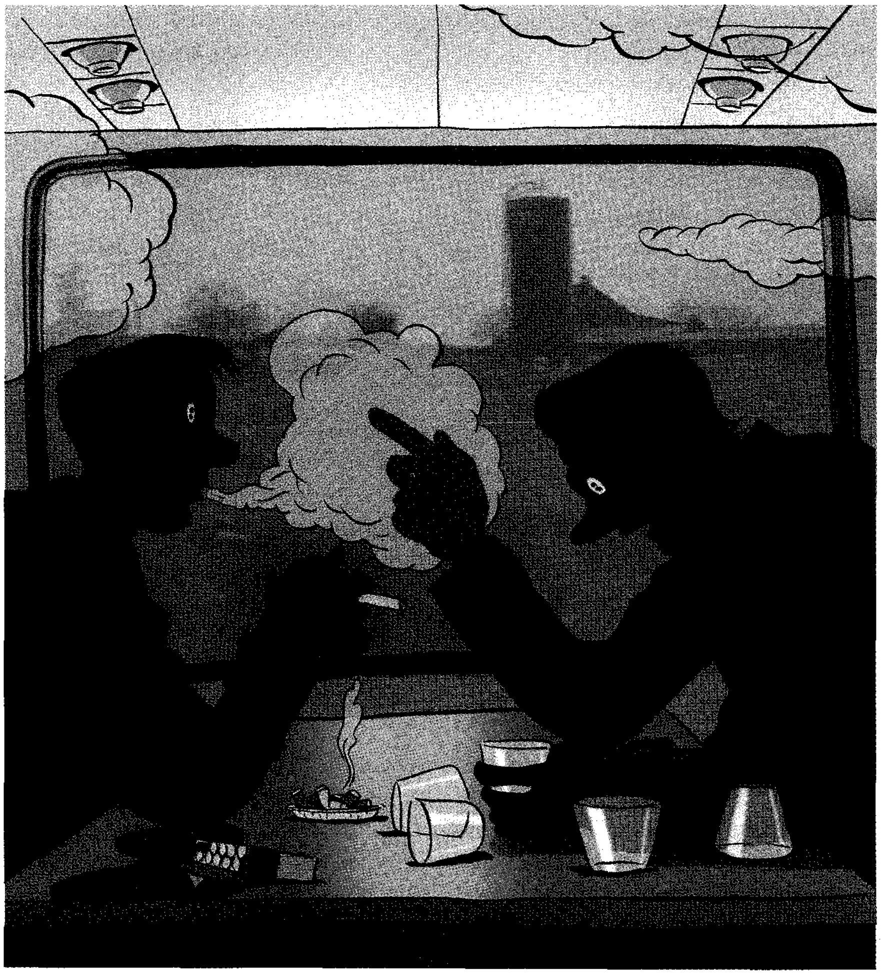
"Now, that's good," Johnny said. "I'll have to remember that."

"I'll have to remind you," I told him, trembling a little at my forwardness. "I mean . . . I'm pretty good at holding on to jokes."

As the black man settled down, I asked Johnny about his family. It didn't surprise me that his mother and father were divorced. Each of them was fifty-four years old, and each was currently living with someone much younger. "My dad's girlfriend—fiancée, I guess I should call her—is no older than me," Johnny said. "Before losing my job, I had my own place, but now I'm living with them. Just, you know, until I get back on my feet."

I nodded.

"My mom, meanwhile, is a total mess," he said. "Total pothead, total motormouth, total perfect match for her asshole thirty-year-old boyfriend."



Nothing in this guy's life sounded normal to me. Take food: He could recall his mother rolling joints on the kitchen counter, but he couldn't remember her cooking a single meal, not even on holidays. For dinner, they'd eat takeout hamburgers or pizzas, sometimes a sandwich slapped together over the sink. Johnny didn't cook, either. Neither did his father or his future stepmother. I asked what was in their refrigerator, and he said, "Ketchup, beer, mixers—what else?" He had no problem referring to himself as an alcoholic. "It's just a fact," he said. "I have blue eyes and black hair, too. Big deal."

"Here's a clean one," the black man said. "A fried-egg sandwich walks into a bar and orders a drink. The bartender looks him up and down, then goes, 'Sorry, we don't serve food here.' "

"Oh, that's old," one of his fellow-drunks said. "Not only that but it's supposed to be a hamburger, not a fried-egg sandwich."

"It's supposed to be *food* is what it's supposed to be," the black man told him. "As to what that food is, I'll make it whatever the hell I want to."

"Amen," Johnny said, and the black man gave him a thumbs-up.

His next joke went over much better. "What did the leper say to the prostitute? 'Keep the tip.' "

I pictured what looked like a mushroom cap resting in the palm of an outstretched hand. Then I covered my mouth and laughed so hard that beer trickled out of my nose. I was just mopping it up when the last call was announced, and everyone raced to the counter to stock up. Some of the drinkers would be at it until morning, when the bar reopened, while others would find their seats and sleep for a while before returning.

As for Johnny, he had a fifth of Smirnoff in his suitcase. I had two Valiums in mine, and, because I have never much cared for sedatives, the decision to share them came easily. An hour later, it was agreed that we needed to smoke some pot. Each of us was holding, so the only question was where to smoke it—and how to get there from the bar. Since taking the Valium, drinking six beers, and following them with straight vodka, walking had become a problem for me. I don't know what it took to bring down Johnny, but he wasn't even close yet. That's what comes with years of socking it away—you should be unconscious, but instead you're up and full of bright ideas. "I think I've got a place we can go to," he said.

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The dirty sunlight in the clerestory
windows of our faux-Parisian lair
lends a streaky, half-forgiving glow
to yet another summit with no purpose:
duck and iron Pinot Noir and double
decaf espresso, sheer necessities
for urban inmates who still keep the faith
with a wan cerise velvet banquette
and eye-level mirror lit with faces
a John-the-Baptist puritan might judge
corrupt with too much liquid happiness.
But it is happiness
to lounge in semi-silence while the day
downshifts and natter on about the shit
that passes for Shinola but we know
is only sauce for the gander.
It's not that we're against the war,
we're against *them:* the boobs, the pimps,
the Know-It-Alls, the True Believers—everyone
who isn't here awash in downtown gold
inhaling the exhaust of Burgundy . . .
Loafing, gloating, having it our way
Friday afternoon at Montrachet.

—*Jonathan Galassi*

I'm not sure why he chose the women's lounge rather than the men's. Perhaps it was closer, or maybe there was no men's lounge. One way or the other, even now, almost twenty years later, it shames me to think of it. The idea of holing up in a bathroom, of hogging the whole thing just so that you can hang out with someone who will never, under any circumstances, return your interest, makes me cringe. Especially given that this—the "dressing room" it was called—was Amtrak's one meagre attempt to recapture some glamour. It amounted to a small chamber with a window—a space not much bigger than a closet. There was an area to sit while brushing your hair or applying makeup, and a mirror to look into while you did it. A second, inner door led to a sink and toilet, but we kept that shut and installed ourselves on the carpeted floor.

Johnny had brought our plastic cups from the bar, and, after settling in, he poured us each a drink. I felt boneless, as if I'd been filleted; yet still I managed to load the pipe and hold my lighter to the bowl. Looking up through the window, I could see the moon, which struck me, in my half-conscious state, as flat and unnaturally bright, a sort of glowing Pringle.

"Do you think we can turn that overhead light off?" I asked.

"No problem, Chief."

It was he who brought up the subject of sex. One moment, I was asking if his mom gave him a discount on his drugs, and the next thing I knew he was telling me about this woman he'd recently had sex with. "A fatty," he called her. "A bloodsucker." Johnny also told me that the older he got the harder it was to get it up. "I'll be totally into it, and then it's, like, 'What the fuck?' You know?"

"Oh, definitely."

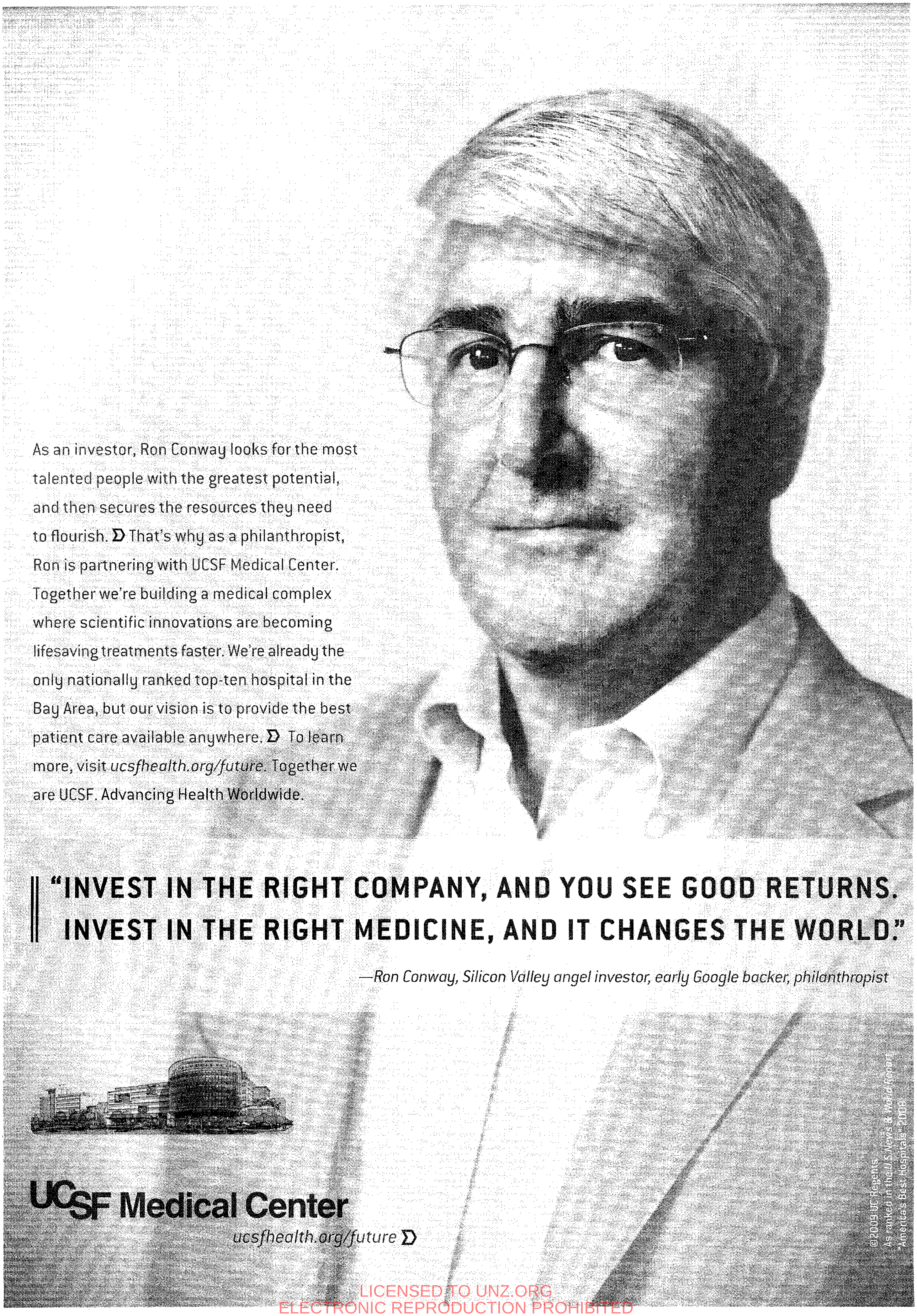
He poured more vodka into his plastic cup and swirled it around, as if it were a fine cognac that needed to breathe. "You get into a lot of fights?" he asked.

"Arguments?"

"No," he said. "I mean with your fists. You ever punch people?"

I relit the pipe and thought of the dustup my former boyfriend and I had had before I left. It was the first time since the fifth grade that I'd hit someone not directly related to me, and it left me feeling like a Grade A moron. This had a lot to do with my punch, which was actually more of a slap. To make it worse, I'd then slipped on the icy sidewalk and fallen into a bank of soft gray snow.

There was no need to answer Johnny's fistfight question. The subject had been raised for his benefit rather than mine, an excuse to bemoan the circumference of his biceps. Back when he was boxing, the one on the right had measured seventeen and a half inches. "Now it's less than fourteen," he told me. "I'm



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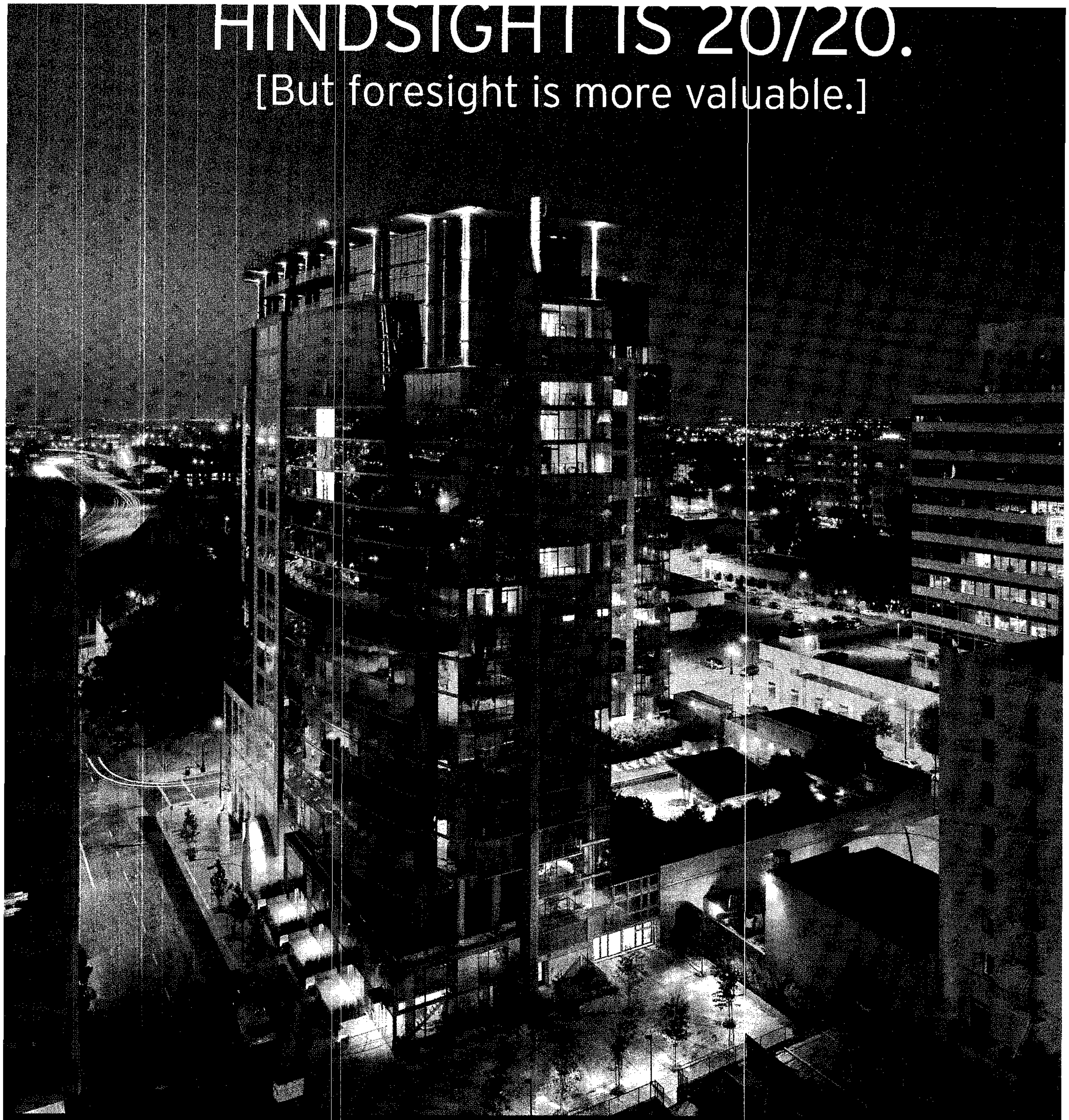

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shrinking before my very fucking eyes.”

“Well, can’t you fatten it back up somehow?” I asked. “You’re young. I mean, just how hard can it be to gain weight?”

“The problem isn’t gaining weight, it’s gaining it in the right place,” Johnny said. “Two six-packs a day might swell my stomach, but it’s not doing shit for my arms.”

“Maybe you could lift the cans for a while before opening them,” I offered. “That should count for something, shouldn’t it?”

Johnny flattened his voice. “You’re a regular comedian, aren’t you? Keep it up and maybe you can open for that asshole in the bar.” A minute of silence and then he relit the pipe, took a hit, and passed it my way. “Look at us,” he said, and he let out a long sigh. “A couple of first-class fucking losers.”

I wanted to defend myself, or at least point out that we were in *second* class, but then somebody knocked on the door. “Go away,” Johnny said. “The bathroom’s closed until tomorrow.” A minute later, there came another knock, this one harder, and before we could respond a key turned and a conductor entered. It wouldn’t have worked to deny anything: the room stunk of pot and cigarette smoke. There was the half-empty bottle of vodka, the plastic cups turned on their sides. Put a couple of lampshades on our heads and the picture would have been complete.

I suppose that the conductor could have made some trouble—confiscated our dope, had us arrested at the next stop—but instead he just told us to take a hike, no easy feat on a train. Johnny and I parted without saying good night, I staggering off to my seat, and he going, I assumed, to his. I saw him again the following morning, back in the bar car. Whatever spell had been cast the night before was broken, and he was just another alcoholic starting his day with a shot and a chaser. As I ordered a coffee, the black man told a joke about a witch with one breast.

“Give it a rest,” the woman in the decorative sweatshirt said.

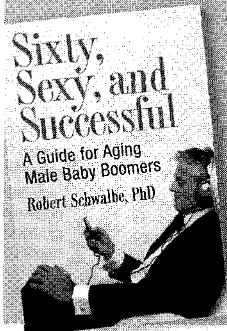
I smoked a few cigarettes and then returned to my seat, nursing what promised to be a two-day headache. While slumped against the window, trying unsuccessfully to sleep, I thought of a trip to Greece I’d taken in August of 1982. I was twenty-four that summer, and flew by myself from Raleigh to Athens. A few days after arriving, I was joined by my father, my brother, and my older sister, Lisa. The four of us travelled around the country, and when they went back to North Carolina I took a bus to the port city of Patras. From there I sailed to Brindisi, Italy, wondering all the while why I hadn’t returned with the rest of my family. In theory it was wonderful—a European adventure. I was too self-conscious to enjoy it, though, too timid, and it stymied me that I couldn’t speak the language.

A bilingual stranger helped me buy a train ticket to Rome, but on the return to Brindisi I had no one but myself to rely on. The man behind the counter offered me three options, and I guess I said yes to the one that meant “No seat for me, thank you. I would like to be packed as tightly as possible amongst people with no access to soap or running water.”

It was a common request, at least among the young and foreign. I heard French, Spanish, German, and a good many languages I couldn’t quite identify. What was it that sounded like English played backward? Dutch? Swedish? If I found the crowd intimidating, it had more to do with my insecurity than with the way anyone treated me. I suppose the others seemed more deserving than I did, with their faded bandannas and goatskin bags sagging with wine. While I was counting the days until I could go back home, they seemed to have a real talent for living.

When I was a young man, my hair was dark brown and a lot thicker than it is now. I had one continuous eyebrow instead of two separate ones, and this made me look as if I sometimes rode a donkey. It sounds odd to say it—conceited, even—but I was cute that August when I was twenty-four. I wouldn’t have said so at the time, but reviewing pictures taken by my father in Athens I think, That was me? Really? Looks-wise, that single month constituted my moment, a peak from which the descent was both swift and merciless.

It’s only three hundred and fifty miles from Rome to Brindisi, but, what with the constant stopping and starting, the train took forever. We left, I believe, at around 8:30 P.M., and for the first few hours everyone stood. Then we sat with our legs



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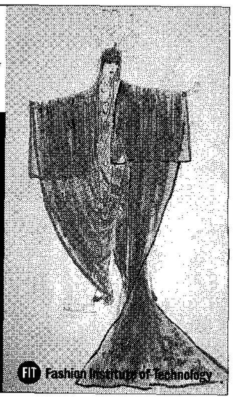

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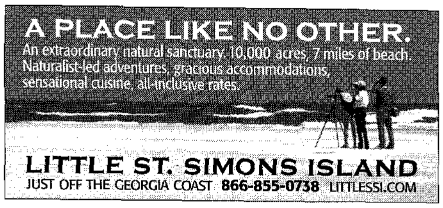

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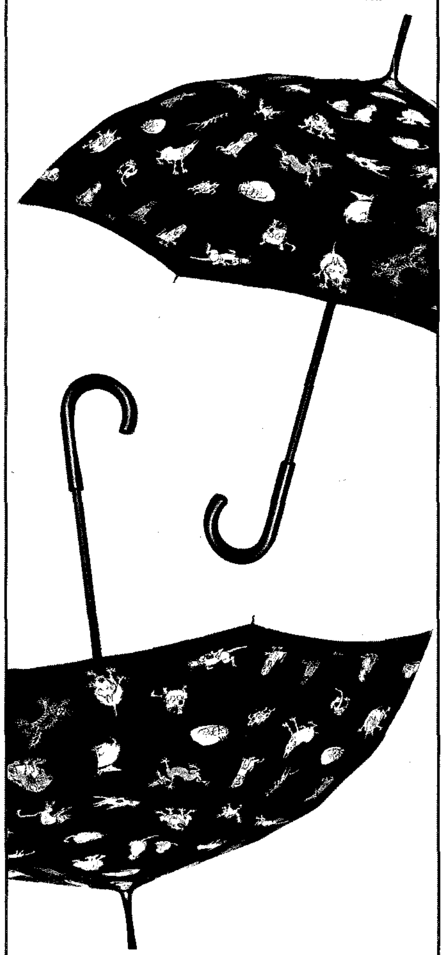

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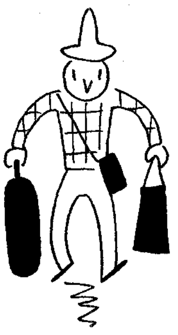
crossed, folding them in a little bit tighter when one person, and then another, decided to lie down. As my fellow-passengers shifted position, I found myself pushed toward the corner, where I brushed up against a fellow named Bashir.

Lebanese, he said he was, en route to a small Italian university, where he planned to get a master's in engineering. Bashir's English was excellent, and in a matter of minutes we formed what passes between wayfarers in a foreign country as a kind of automatic friendship. More than a friendship, actually—a romance. Coloring everything was this train, its steady rumble as we passed through the dark Italian countryside. Bashir was—how to describe him? It was as if someone had coaxed the eyes out of Bambi and resettled them, half asleep, into a human face. Nothing hard or ruined-looking there; in fact, it was just the opposite—angelic, you might call him, pretty.



What was it that he and I talked about so intently? Perhaps the thrill was that we *could* talk, that our tongues, flabby from lack of exercise, could flap and make sounds in their old familiar way. Three hours into our conversation, he invited me to get off the train in his college town and spend some time, as much as I liked, in the apartment that was waiting for him. It wasn't the offer you'd make to a backpacker but something closer to a proposal. "Be with me" was the way I interpreted it.

At the end of our car was a little room, no more than a broom closet, really, with a barred window in it. It must have been 4 A.M. when two dishevelled Germans stepped out, and we moved in to take their place. As would later happen with Johnny Ryan, Bashir and I sat on the floor, the state of which clearly disgusted him. Apart from the fact that we were sober and were pressed so close that our shoulders touched, the biggest difference was that our attraction was mutual. The moment came when we should have kissed—you could practically hear the surging strings—but I was too shy to make the first move, and so, I guess, was he. Still, I could feel this thing between us, not just lust but a kind of immediate love, the sort that, like instant oatmeal, can be realized in a matter of minutes and is just as nutritious as the real thing. We'll kiss . . . now, I kept thinking. Then, O.K. . . . now. And on it went, more torturous by the second.

The sun was rising as we reached his destination, the houses and church spires of this strange city—a city I could make my own—silhouetted against the weak morning sky. "And so?" he asked.

I don't remember my excuse, but it all came down to cowardice. For what, really, did I have to return to? A job pushing a wheelbarrow on Raleigh construction sites? A dumpy one-bedroom next to the IHOP?

Bashir got off with his three big suitcases and became a perennial lump in my throat, one that rises whenever I hear the word "Lebanon" or see its jittery outline on the evening news. Is that where you went back to? I wonder. Do you ever think of me? Are you even still alive?

Given the short amount of time we spent together, it's silly how often, and how tenderly, I think of him. All the way to Penn Station, hung over from my night with Johnny Ryan, I wondered what might have happened had I taken Bashir up on his offer. I imagined our apartment overlooking a square: the burbling fountain, the drawings of dams and bridges piled neatly on the desk.

When you're young, it's easy to believe that such an opportunity will come again, maybe even a better one. Instead of a Lebanese guy in Italy, it might be a Nigerian one in Belgium, or maybe a Pole in Turkey. You tell yourself that if you travelled alone to Europe this summer you could surely do the same thing next year and the year after that. Of course, you don't, though, and the next thing you know you're an aging, unemployed elf, so desperate for love that you spend your evening mooning over a straight alcoholic.

The closer we got to New York the more miserable I became. Then I thought of this guy my friend Lili and I had borrowed a ladder from a few months earlier, someone named Hugh. I'd never really trusted people who went directly from one relationship to the next, so after my train pulled into Penn Station, and after I'd taken the subway home, I'd wait a few hours, or maybe even a full day, before dialling his number and asking if he'd like to hear a joke. ♦

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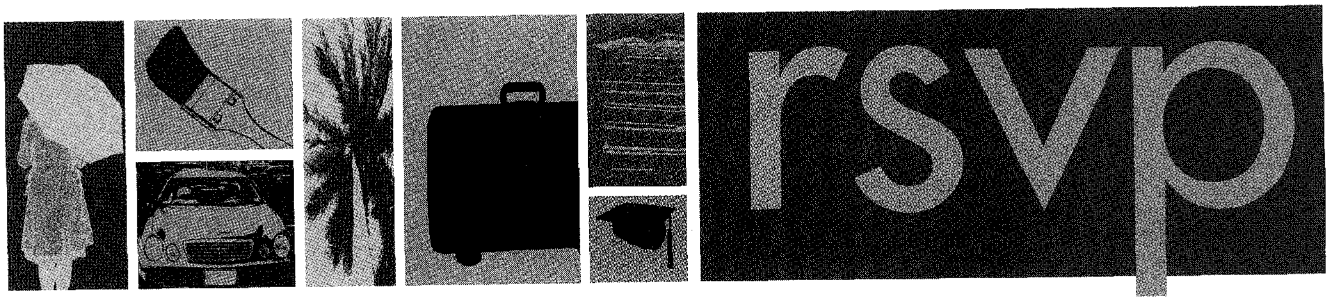

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

FUN TIMES!

BY LARRY DOYLE

Do your kids like to have fun?

Come to Fun Times![*]

Do you like to watch your kids having fun?

Bring 'em to Fun Times!

Are your kids sullen, withdrawn, wearing a lot of black lately? And there you are, your life practically over, and for what?

ISTVAN BANYAI

For gosh sakes, get the whole family down to Fun Times!

Fun Times!'s "fine amusement dining" is the most fun you can have, legally, in the United States right now. Why spend thousands of dollars flying to Disney World when you can spend less than half that and remain indoors and malaria-free, within a day's drive of most cities?

To find the Fun Times! nearest you, simply get on your favorite highway and keep going until you hear the fun!

Park in any of our outer lots and hop on the Jolly Trolley[†], or walk if you prefer. Once you've reached the Fun Times! intake office, you will be asked to fill out a few simple waivers and financial-disclosure forms.

You're moments away from fun!

Next, you'll purchase your children's Fun Times! Happy Cards!, which can be loaded in twenty-dollar increments by Grumpy McPoops, or set to Unlimited Happiness! for kids whose parents would prefer to spend the money now rather than later, after the damage has already been done.

You're on the cusp of fun!

Release the children!

The first thing you'll want to do upon entering the Fun Times! Game Dome is stagger over to the Grownup Pagoda and purchase a pair of earplugs. They cost a little more, but we recommend Westone ES49s, the kind Pete Townshend uses to preserve what's left of his hearing.

Now take a look around.[‡] Was there ever anything this much fun when you were a kid? Maybe there was, and your parents lied to you about it. But you're not them, and you don't have to be them. Just one look in your children's glowing, jittery eyes will tell you. That may not happen right away, but rest assured your kids are in here somewhere, enjoying video-game graphics almost as good as the ones at home. While you're waiting, why not check out our costumed entertainment? We are proud to host the Medi-Cools, a cartoon menagerie developed by Hanna-Barbera for the National Institutes of Health in the nineteen-seventies. Feel free to arm-wrestle with Mike O'Cardial or shake hands with Whiz and Wee, the Kidney Twins, because, for the most part, the children won't go near them.[§]

Don't bother yelling; your kids can't hear you.

Maybe you should eat something. There's a restaurant in here, too, in the direction of the smell. For the little ones, we have pizza, fries, and chicken shapes. And, for you, six sizes of beer!

We strongly advise against searching for your kids down the Console Canyons; they'll find their way out long before you do. What we recommend is that you pick one place, and stand there.

But not there!

You've been Goob™ed!

Don't worry, that was gallons and gallons of totally "natural" fun[**], which won't ruin any fabric developed after 2005. The slight burning sensation you feel is not humiliation, so relax and enjoy the laughter of hundreds of children, all because of you!

And look: here come your kids now, laughing like they've never laughed before, and apparently unharmed. They just want you to hold on to the six hundred game tickets they've accumulated so far—almost halfway to a Frog Clacker!—and then they're gone again, into the fun.

Did they call back "I love you, Dad!" as they slipped into the neon darkness? We think they did.

---

[*] Fun Times!, formerly Fun Tymes, is not affiliated with Ye Olde Fun Tymes or the New York Times Company, and does not recognize their debts or financial obligations.

[†] The Jolly Trolley is not operated by the Fun Times! Company, which makes no warrants as to its driver, Glenn, or to the final destination of the Trolley.

[‡] Epileptics should not take a look around.

[§] Attention, ladies: Dr. Lungtissue is not a licensed physician.

[**] Goob™ is a proprietary peanut-based gel, which may contain traces of peanuts and whole peanuts still in the shell. People who are sensitive to peanuts and/or treenuts should have read the waiver more carefully. ♦

Stories of HAWAIʻI

Depth Perceptions.

Described as "haunting and surreal," the mostly black-and-white underwater images that Hawaiʻi-based photographer Wayne Levin captures underscore the mystery of deep-space marine life.

TOP: MANTA DIVE ©WAYNE LEVIN PHOTOGRAPHY; *LEVIN INSET:* ©JOHN DEMELLO/HVCB; *BELOW, FROM LEFT:* MANTA RAY WITH AMBERJACK ©WAYNE LEVIN PHOTOGRAPHY; PENCIL SEA URCHIN ©TIM DOHERTY

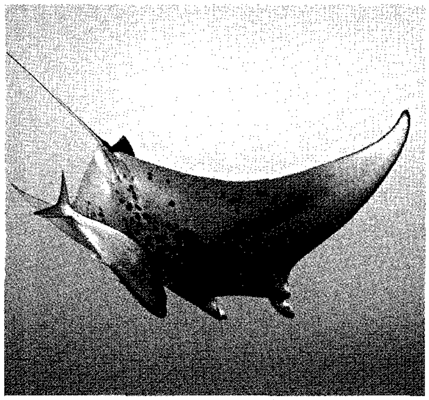
AS NIGHT FALLS ALONG the Kona coast of Hawaiʻi's Big Island, Wayne Levin snaps on his face mask, adjusts his air tank and buoyancy vest, and steps off the boat into the warm Pacific. Toting cameras, he sinks thirty feet to the bottom.

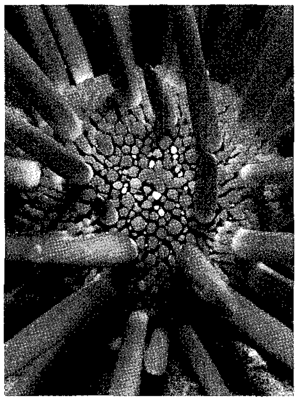
"It's a black void, like flying in space," he says. "You're floating weightlessly."

The world is silent but for the sound of his breathing. In the darkness Levin beams his light forward, following the dive master to a column of illumination shining upward from the ocean floor.

Suddenly, from above, dark shapes undulate toward them, drawn by the light and the plankton it attracts. This is what he's been waiting for. "It's like conjuring up night spirits, and the manta rays are the spirits," he says.

Somersaulting, some with wingspans twelve feet across, the mantas are captured in Levin's stark black-and-white photos. They are part of an expansive body of work that has spanned four decades. It is represented in the collections of major museums like New York's MOMA and Honolulu's Bishop Museum, and has been featured in solo and group exhibitions. "They'll come right at you, with this huge gaping mouth," he says of the mantas. "You think they're going to hit you, but they always miss. Maybe just by an inch."





Etching reality with a viewfinder, Levin spends much of his life exploring Hawaiian reefs and hunting elusive images. Free-diving in Kealakekua Bay, he finds schools of skittering big-eyed scad or *akule* fish, ten thousand strong, and dolphins in an underwater ballet.

Through his lens emerges a world that exists nowhere else on earth—with five thousand species of marine plants and animals and more than five hundred reef fish, thirty per cent found only in Hawaiian waters. "It's like going through the looking glass," says Levin.

Triathletes stroking in unison above him seem like a pod of sea creatures. Surfers kicking with swim fins through crashing waves appear to be floating through cloud formations. Strands of kelp sway like wheat in the wind.

Levin has loved photography since junior high when his father gave him a Brownie box camera and a develop-your-own-film kit. An early interest in sailing turned his eyes toward the ocean; surfing and surf films made him look beneath its surface.

His next photo challenge is Hawaiʻi's Northwestern Islands, a string of atolls, coral reefs, and weathered volcanic cones stretching a thousand miles and now a national marine sanctuary. "It's one of the most wild areas left," Levin says.

"I don't want to take photographs to explain the underwater world," he continues. "I want to take photographs that increase the mystery."

– Beverly Creamer

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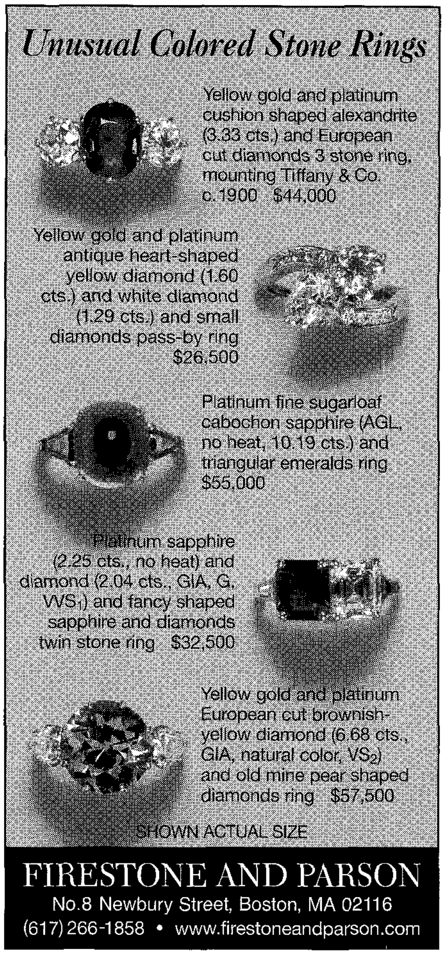

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ANNALS OF ADVENTURE

ROUGHING IT

What two young women found in the Rockies.

BY DOROTHY WICKENDEN

Late on the evening of July 27, 1916, after a five-day journey culminating in a twelve-hour train ride across the Continental Divide, Rosamond Underwood and Dorothy Woodruff arrived at the depot in Hayden, Colorado. They had been hired to teach at the new school in Elkhead, in the mountains seventeen miles north of town. The two women, who were fleeing privileged but unfulfilling lives in the East, had got on the train in Denver. They regarded it, Dorothy said, as "something of a joke," with its halting progress and periodic breakdowns, but by the end of the journey they were awed by the engineering feat that the rail line represented: it was the highest ever built in North America. They spent the long hours on the observation platform and in the parlor car, preparing for their classes and talking with other passengers. When they finally got to Hayden, they saw that the depot consisted of a single boxcar. The train door opened, and they were greeted by their employer, Farrington Carpenter—a young cattle rancher, Hayden's first attorney, and the man who was largely responsible for the existence of the school.

The electricity in Hayden had gone out earlier that night, and Carpenter couldn't see much of the new teachers as he helped them down the steep steps of the train. Rosamond was tall, slender, and soft-spoken. Dorothy, four feet eleven, with a round, cheerful face, was frank and exuberant. They had grown up together in Auburn, New York, a small industrial city in the Finger Lakes region, where Rosamond's father was a county judge and Dorothy's owned the Auburn Button Works factory. Their neighborhood had wide streets, imposing Victorian houses, and several generations of Underwoods and Woodruffs. In 1909, they had graduated from Smith College, where students, as the college's first president described its mission, were taught to become "refined, intelligent gentlewomen." Back home, Dorothy had been the president of the Young Ladies' Benevolent Association, and Rosamond of the Auburn College Club. Supporters of Hull House, they also stood on soapboxes in the nearby town of Owasco advocating women's suffrage.

They were twenty-nine years old and, uninspired by the Auburn men who had expressed interest in them, were considered by friends and family to be hopeless spinsters. That fate worried them less than the thought of settling into a life without adventure or intellectual stimulation. In the spring of 1916, during a conversation at a tea about career possibilities for women, Rosamond learned about Carpenter's search for two teachers, and immediately saw it as an opportunity. She called Dorothy, who shared her excitement, but anticipated her family's alarm: "No young lady in our town had ever been hired by anybody."

The women didn't know anything about teaching or about the discomforts of life on the frontier, but they wrote to Carpenter anyway, and he seemed unconcerned about their lack of credentials. He told them that he wanted the Elkhead School to provide the highest standards in modern education, and they were reassured to learn that he was a graduate of Princeton and of Harvard Law School. By the time their families heard about the idea, the women had been hired and were preparing for the journey. Carpenter wrote to say that he had found them a place to live, with a family of homesteaders two miles from the school, and advised, "If you have a .22 you had better bring it out here as there are lots of young sage chicken to be found in that country and August is the open season on them."

Although Carpenter did intend to create a great school, his plan was also something of a ruse. Tall and rangy, with large ears, a long face, and a prominent nose, he, too, was twenty-nine years old, and had grown up in Evanston, Illinois, in a family much like the Underwoods and the Woodruffs. He had recast himself as a guileless Westerner, but it was not an entirely persuasive persona. He was shrewd and opportunistic, and his friends had chosen him to solve their biggest problem: the absence of eligible women in the vicinity. A freewheeling storyteller, he told a writer who was profiling him in the *Saturday Evening Post*, in 1952, "We did not want strays. We had serious matrimonial intentions, and we decided that young, pretty schoolteachers would be the best bet of all." However, he tailored his correspondence to Rosamond and Dorothy to appeal to their ideals about teaching and to their hopes for excitement in the Rockies. He did not mention that he meant to present them as prospective brides for the local "boys."

Ferry Carpenter, as he was known, had been entranced by the West ever since boyhood, when he spent a summer on a ranch in New Mexico. As a freshman at Princeton, he had heard from a friend about Routt County, Colorado—four and a half million acres of mostly public land between Steamboat Springs and the Utah border, where any adult could file a homestead claim. During the next two summers, he worked as a ranch hand near Hayden, and the day he turned twenty-one he staked a claim in the Elkhead Mountains, ten miles northwest of town. He called his three-hundred-and-twenty-acre property Oak Point, and in his autobiography, "Confessions of a Maverick," he wrote that when he received his certificate of approval from the land office he felt he was "a frontiersman at last, a citizen of the American fraternity of empire builders."

In 1907, he and a friend went into the cattle-ranching business with twenty-five purebred Herefords and a twenty-five-hundred-dollar loan from his father. His partner took care of the ranch while he was in Cambridge, and, four years later, after earning his law degree, Carpenter moved to Oak Point. He set up a law practice on Walnut Street in Hayden, a modest outpost with a population of around four hundred, several stores, two banks, a school, a church, and a weekly newspaper, the *Routt County Republican*. One of the two bathtubs in town was at the barbershop, and cowboys lined up there on Saturdays for a scrub. In the summer, Carpenter rode a bicycle to and from town, a very hilly round trip of close to three hours. In the winter, he slept in a tiny bedroom behind his office, an eight-by-thirty-eight-foot lean-to—formerly a one-lane bowling alley. His office was the social hub of Hayden, as he put it, "a favorite loafing place for visiting ranchmen whose wives traded eggs and cream for groceries at the stores."

Dorothy Woodruff and Rosamond Underwood, in 1916. Elkhead, Colorado, needed teachers and prospective brides.

HAYDEN HERITAGE CENTER

A hundred years ago, the Progressive Era was fully under way, even in the farthest reaches of Colorado, and Carpenter, deeply influenced by the egalitarian and civic-spirited principles of Woodrow Wilson, the president of Princeton when he was an undergraduate, became a prodigious community organizer. He persuaded Hayden's town board to replace the communal pump with a proper water and sewage system, and he was determined to improve the schools, which in the outlying areas were neglected or nonexistent. As early as August, 1910, Carpenter circulated a petition to form a separate school district in Elkhead, reasoning that this would solve two problems: provide a tax base and a good education for the children of homesteaders, who lived too far from Hayden to attend school there; and insure a steady supply of cultured and attractive teachers.

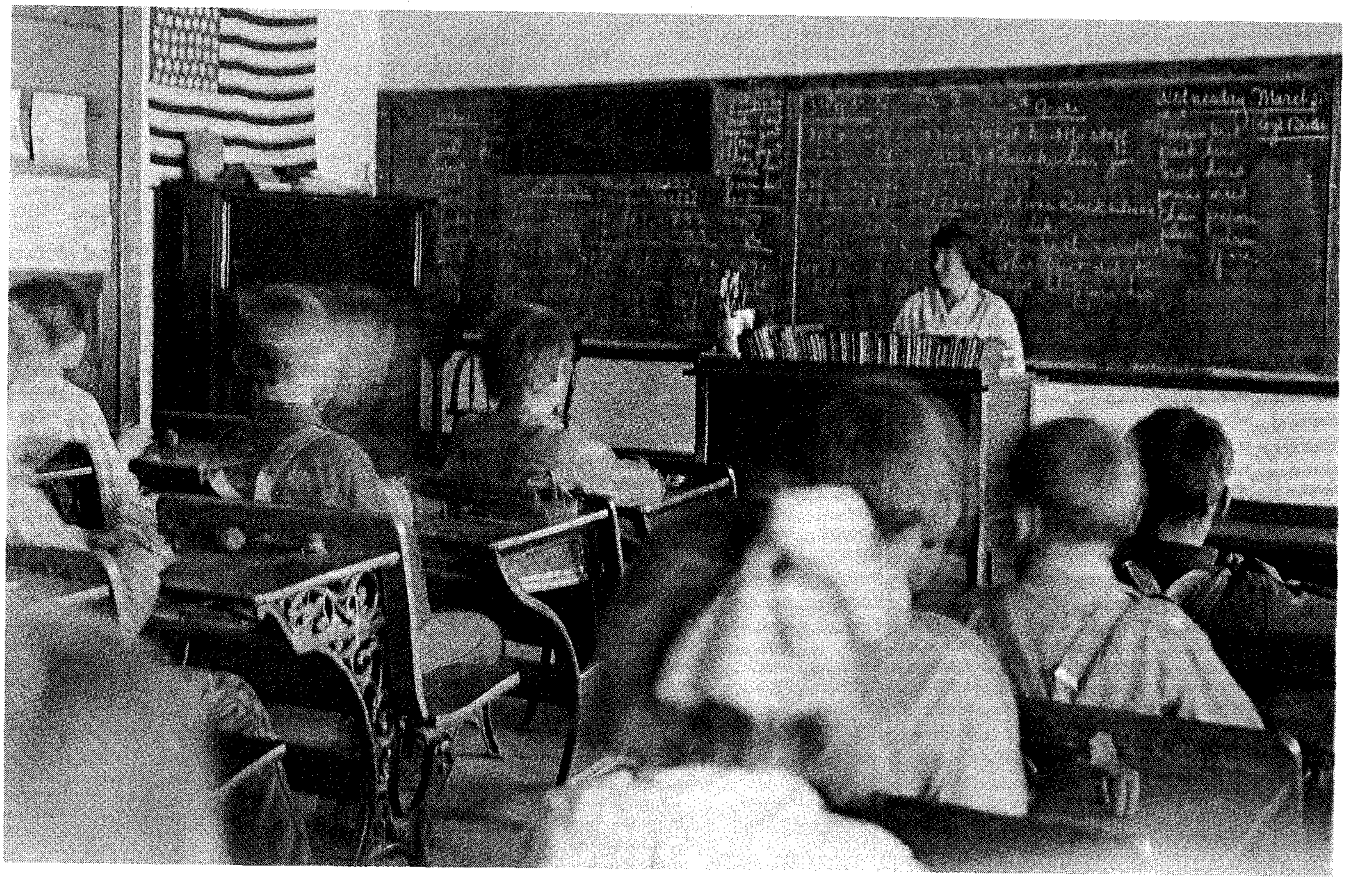
Carpenter, who was the president of the Elkhead school board, was dissatisfied with the first schools built there—two drafty one-room cabins that operated sporadically. So were other board officials and Elkhead parents, and finally, in May, 1915, the residents voted five thousand dollars in bonds to build a large central schoolhouse. The advertisement for two teachers requested that candidates send a recent photograph along with their application. In Carpenter's roguish account, his ranching partner—also a board member—would call him in Hayden and say, "'Two more applicants today, both blondes.' I would reply, 'Tack the photos around the wall of your kitchen and let the bachelors vote on them.'"

Apparently, he was somewhat more high-minded in the final selection process. His friend Bob Perry—a thirty-one-year-old mine supervisor in Oak Creek, forty-five miles southeast of Hayden—had two sisters who had graduated from Smith. Bob got in touch with one of them, and, according to Ferry, she said that Rosamond and Dorothy were "the prettiest and liveliest girls in their class." The new teachers, oblivious of Carpenter's scheming, liked him immediately when he met their train that night. "We are tremendously impressed by Mr. C., who is a big man," Dorothy wrote to her family the next day. "He has a gentle, kindly manner, with keen eyes, and a fine sense of humor." Referring to Carpenter and his neighbors who had planned and built the schoolhouse, she wrote, "Their courage and inspiration about it all is wonderful, and you can see that it is *such* idealism which is making this country."

Carpenter's initial impression of the teachers was that they did not travel light. He left their enormous trunks at the depot overnight, and staggered down the wooden sidewalk with their suitcases, packed with books, to the Hayden Inn. The proprietress, Rosamond said in an oral history that she recorded in 1973, "had left a note on the table for us saying: Schoolteachers, go upstairs and see if anyone is in Room 2. If they are, go to Room 3, and if 3 is filled, go to Room 4. Well, we found that 3 was empty, so we went to bed, glad to be there after that long trip."

Early the next morning, Carpenter wrote, he got a call from Bob Perry, who was at the depot and wanted to know what the women looked like. Frustrated by Carpenter's inconclusive reply, Perry suggested that they meet at the inn. By the time Carpenter got there, half a dozen men, including Perry, "were standing around admiring them. I could see by the glazed look on Bob's face as he stared at Rosamond that he was already smitten." Carpenter recalled that Perry took him aside and said, "'Watch her mail. Let me know if some man is writing her,'" but he failed to mention that he, too, was dazzled by Rosamond. As Carpenter's son Ed told me recently, "The question was, who's gonna win her, Ferry or Perry?"

Dorothy's description, decades later, of the scene at the Hayden Inn offers a wry counterpoint to Carpenter's. She



Dorothy Woodruff in her classroom. She wrote fondly about the boys at the Elkhead School, despite her trouble disciplining them.

said that when she and Rosamond walked into the dining room half a dozen cowboys were seated at a large round table. It was the women's first hint that teaching school was not the only reason they had been invited to Routt County. "Of course nobody got up or anything, they simply stared at us," Dorothy recalled. She noticed that the man next to her was wearing a boiled white shirt with no collar, and a diamond stud in the neckband. She and Rosamond politely tried to make conversation, "but all we got out from anybody was 'Yes ma'am' and 'No ma'am' or 'I wouldn't know ma'am.' " The dumbstruck men just passed the food around the table again and again: hot cereal, hot biscuits, homemade jams, and coffee.

Dorothy Woodruff was my grandmother. White-haired, impeccably attired, sometimes stern, she bore the imprint of her Victorian upbringing. The second-youngest of seven children, she was reared mostly by an Irish nanny, and she and her siblings rarely ventured into the kitchen; when her own children were growing up, she didn't know how to cook anything except creamed potatoes and cocoa. Every night, she brushed her hair a hundred strokes with a French boar-bristle brush. Her fourposter bed, inherited from her parents, was so high, and she was so short, that she climbed into it with the assistance of a needlepoint footstool. She once told me, a little haughtily, "I never wore a pair of trousers in my life."

Yet she was also expansive, funny, and full of admiration for the people she had got to know in Colorado. She spent nine months there, which shaped her as much as her entire youth in Auburn. As I was going through some files last fall, I found copies of the dozens of letters she had written to her parents and sisters in 1916 and '17, and the transcript of an oral history that she had made at our house in suburban Connecticut in the late nineteen-seventies. (The originals are now part of the Sophia Smith Collection, at Smith College.) I hadn't read any of this in more than twenty years. Among other things, I discovered that she had worn trousers after all, at least while she was in Elkhead. And, as I investigated further, I learned that the other main characters in her story had left behind their own vivid accounts of that year.

The homesteaders had embarked upon an exceedingly risky venture. Snow covered the ground six months of the year, and winter temperatures could plunge to fifty degrees below zero; in summer, the few creeks and streams in the hills dried up. Springtime was no easier, with its ice, snowmelt, and heavy, wet adobe clay, which clung to boots, stained clothes, and often made the few roads and paths impassable. Nevertheless, homesteaders were drawn to the region by its stark beauty and by the government's promise of free land.

Soon after breakfast on July 28, 1916, Dorothy and Rosamond climbed onto the seat of an old spring wagon, next to their driver, a young clerk from one of the stores in Hayden. Their trunks, secured by ropes, towered behind them, and their horses—obtained by Carpenter at a good price—were saddled and bridled and tied to the back. Of the ride through mesas and canyons, Dorothy wrote, "We wound in and out, up and down, going at a pace that put our hearts in our mouths, and we were sure the trunks were either going to careen over on us or our horses." Finally, late in the afternoon, they arrived at the homestead of Uriah and Mary Harrison, in Upper Elkhead, "a square box, part log and part frame," as she described it, "with a smoke stack sticking up; the steps consist of a soap box, shakily resting on stones." The closest neighbor was four miles away.

The Harrisons had recently moved from Lower Elkhead, and their house had no dividing walls yet, just partitions made of bedclothes and rugs. "This lends intimacy to an unimagined degree, and you know it every time any one turns over in bed," Dorothy noted. "It is especially sociable when the wind blows." She and Ros ate with the family—the parents and the three of their seven children still living at home, Lewis, Ruth, and Frank—at one end of the large kitchen. They climbed to their room on a set of "rather shaky and ladder-like" stairs. The teachers shared a narrow iron bed—which the Harrisons later proudly replaced with one made of brass—covered with a big feather bed and patchwork quilts. A brown rug served as a wall between their room and the two other upstairs rooms,

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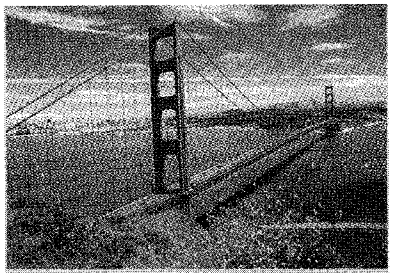

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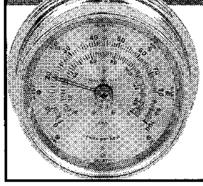

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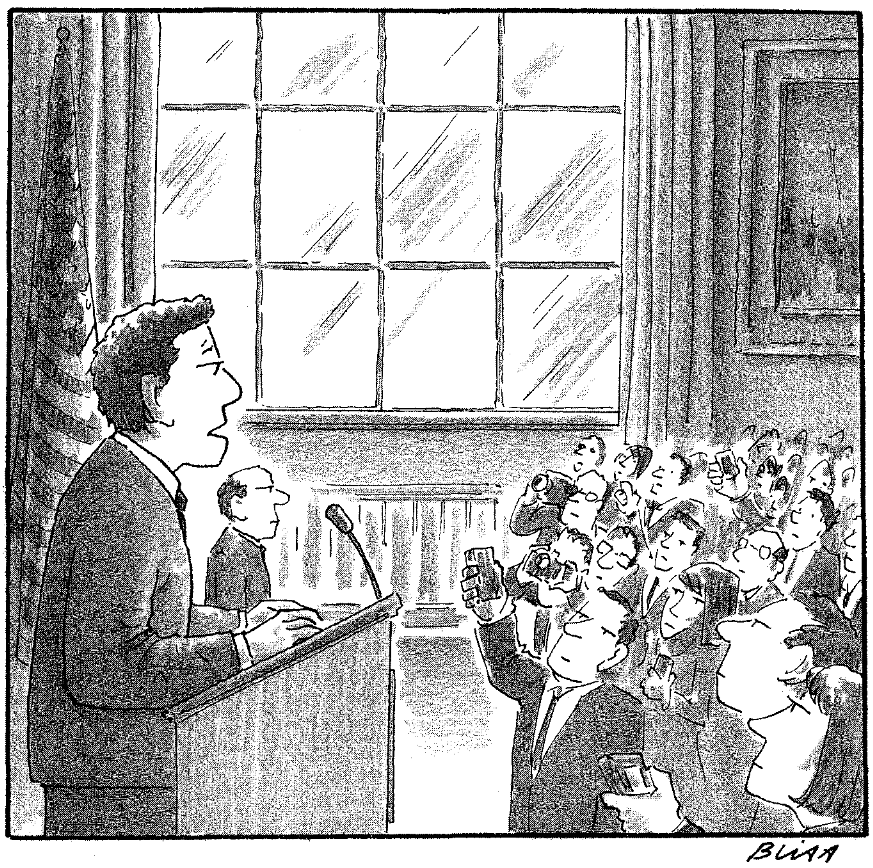

"I'll take one more question, from the reporter in the back reading the job listings."

where the Harrison children slept.

Dorothy and Rosamond quickly came to revere Mary Harrison, who more than fulfilled their image of the stoic, good-humored pioneer woman. Tiny and wrinkled, she wore her thin gray hair pulled back tightly in a bun and had "an astonishing set of false teeth." She enjoyed her boarders, too, and treated them with extraordinary generosity. But she couldn't understand why they were teaching, and asked them one evening, "You girls aren't here for the money you can make, are you?" She also laughed at their haplessness with simple domestic chores. Rosamond recalled that they set out the first Saturday to wash their silk shirts, fetching water from the sulfur spring a quarter mile away and heating it on the stove. "We thought we'd done pretty well," she said. But the next Friday they returned from school and "found our clothes neatly washed and ironed and laid on our bed."

The schoolmarms' only real concern was about teaching. One source of dread was Sunday school, which turned out to be among their duties and was overseen by the bureaucratic and pious Iva Rench, who, Dorothy wrote uncharitably, "has as many officers as there are people. You ought to hear her screech out those Halleluia hymns." Another was the idea of giving instruction in "domestic science" to girls who knew a great deal more about it than they did. In addition, a few weeks after their arrival they had to pass the county teachers' examinations, which lasted sixteen hours over two days, and covered ten subjects ranging from arithmetic to physiology.

The morning after Rosamond and Dorothy arrived at the Harrisons', they rode to the Elkhead School. Thirteen-year-old Lewis Harrison showed them the way; he cared for their horses and served as their guide and, during the snowy months, as their trailblazer. They followed Calf Creek and climbed a small trail through the sagebrush, looking out on a sight that resembled "a topographical map," as Dorothy described it, "roll after roll of rounded bare hills with little water creases marking them—and no sign of human being or habitation." The snowcapped mountains in the distance were purple and blue, their color changing with the light. Rosamond wrote about their first glimpse of the schoolhouse, a solitary building at the top of the highest hill, "It is the Parthenon of Elkhead!"

The school, which had been completed several months before the teachers' arrival, was already the center of community activities, serving as an improvised church, theatre, party hall, and polling place. Elkhead residents had high aspirations for their neighborhood. In 1973, Carpenter told his granddaughter Belle Zars, who was working on a Harvard dissertation on the Elkhead School, that he had anticipated that the population would double or triple, and said, "You didn't want to build a little wooden shack there." He had in mind a solid stone building, constructed out of rocks from the nearby hillside, and he helped the stonemasons design it. "All the windows were made big, and all the light came in over the child's shoulders and no light came in on his face," he said. The school had electricity, a projector with educational slides donated by the Ford Motor Company, and, in the basement, a domestic-science room, a makeshift gymnasium, and a large coal furnace.

When Rosamond and Dorothy arrived on the first day, many of the children were already there. Fifty-eight years later, Bobbie Robinson, a student of Ros's, said, "I'll never forget the first morning when Lewis Harrison and the two new teachers rode up to the school. I thought Miss Underwood was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen and I still think she was. . . . I don't believe there ever was a community that was affected more by two people than we were by those two girls."

Because Dorothy lacked confidence in her skills in mathematics and Latin, she and Rosamond had agreed that she would teach the younger children. She wrote in August that she had a class of ten boys, between six and fourteen, whom she had trouble disciplining, and one six-year-old girl. Rosamond had two boys and six girls, five of them ninth graders, and her students were far less boisterous. The enormous room was divided by a wooden partition, which the teachers opened for joint classroom activities.

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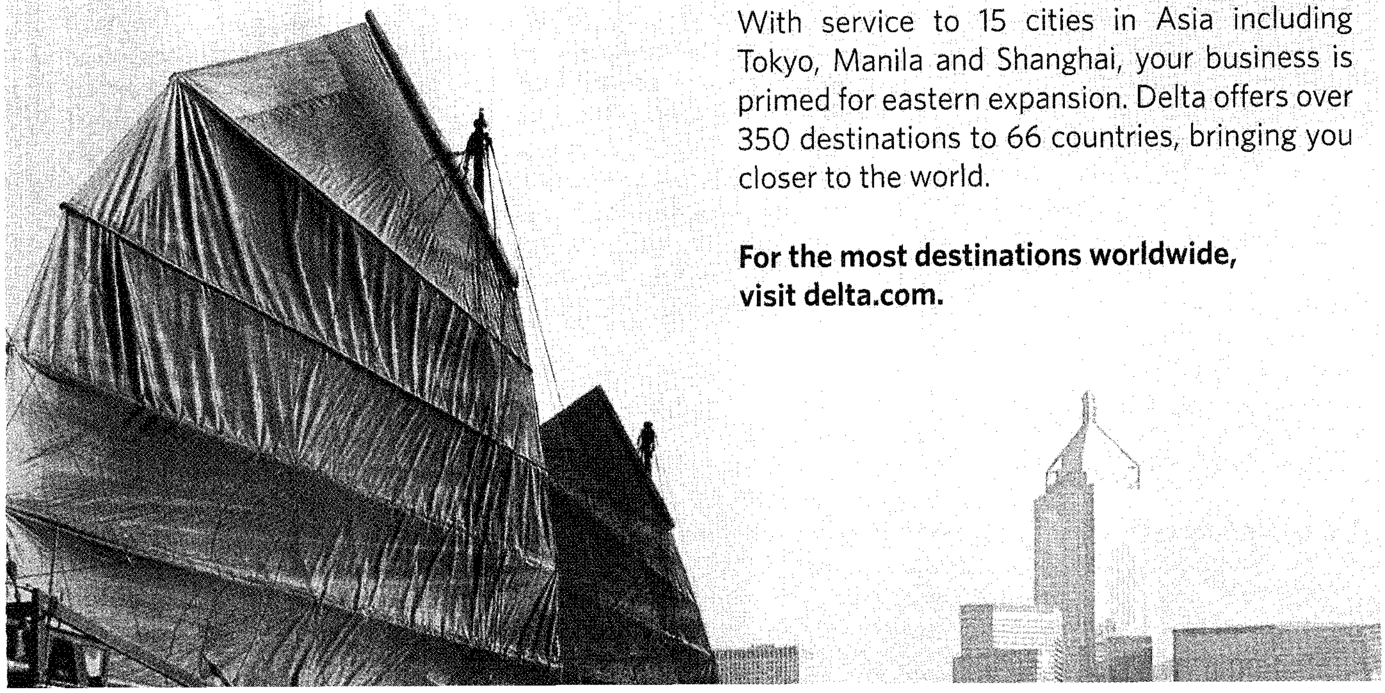


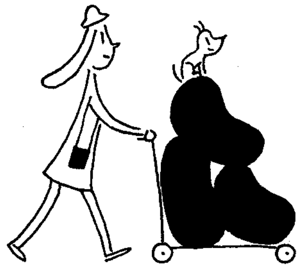
telling," Dorothy said in one letter. "They make a mad scramble to pick up all loose papers, put their desks in order, and then fold their hands and sit at attention! When I stand there and look down at those eager little faces I forget how naughty they are and I try to thrill and please them as I never tried before." On Fridays, she wrote in another letter, "I tell them about current events, if I know any, and then two children from each room recite, and we end up with a song. They hang onto their suspenders and dig a grimy toe into the floor and just agonize through it." She was exasperated by the boys' misbehavior, and occasionally resorted to corporal punishment, but she wrote fondly about twelve-year-old Tommy Jones, whom she described as "the worst of the lot": he "doesn't know *anything*, just never having tried, and his spelling is a work of art." A few weeks after school began, Tommy appeared at the Harrison ranch with some tributes to his teacher: "a turnip as big as a cabbage in one hand, a squash under one arm and a bunch of poppies squeezed in his hot little hand!"

Rudolph Morsbach, age nine, corrected Dorothy when she told the class that London was the biggest city in the world: "No, Mam, my father says New York is!" Then he added, "Well, it might be Kansas City!" He also informed her that Mr. Carpenter was the President of the United States. The boys refused to listen to her warnings about throwing rocks until she bribed them by promising a gift of rubber balls; their own were made of string. On October 26th, Dorothy reported laconically, "Rudolph cracked Tommy over the head with a board yesterday & nearly killed him."

Ferry Carpenter made regular visits to the school, reading Tennyson to the children and helping out with the domestic-science class. One Monday, he gave "a demonstration in corn bread making, old bachelor style," the *Republican* reported. "The corn bread was fine." He also joined the teachers for midday dinner on Sundays, accompanied by Bob Perry, who took the train from Oak Creek to Hayden, presumably the night before, picked up a horse, met Carpenter at his cabin, and then rode the final seven miles with him to the Harrison ranch. Perry had a degree in mining engineering from Columbia, and he was well established in his job at the Oak Creek mine, one of several owned by his father, a wealthy Denver industrialist. On horseback, the only place the teachers had any privacy, they weighed the comparative merits of the two men: Carpenter, a witty, intellectual risk-taker; Perry, handsome, steady, and more traditionally gallant.

The suitors didn't do much to disguise their intentions toward Ros, although it was a gentlemanly rivalry. The Harrisons' twenty-year-old son, Frank, observing them at dinner, later described them as "young fellows with tail feathers blooming." In mid-August, when the teachers went to Steamboat Springs to take their exams, Carpenter escorted them to the Hayden station. Dorothy wrote about the "nervous strain" of the train ride to Steamboat, and the tests turned out to be more idiosyncratic than they had expected, including questions such as "Describe the changes that take place in 'egg on toast' during the process of digestion," "Explain methods of bidding on and letting road work by contract," and "Give a physiological reason for not boxing children's ears." The experience was tempered by Carpenter, who appeared on the second evening and took them out for a steak dinner; and by Perry, who drove twenty-five miles from Oak Creek and treated them to a picnic of freshly shot grouse. "This Bob Perry is very attractive and saved our lives by offering to bring us home by machine," Dorothy said. They later reported to their families that they had passed the exams with distinction.

The same month, Carpenter held his annual birthday party at Oak Point. Around a hundred people came, most from ten to twenty miles away. He moved the furniture out and placed benches along the inside walls of his cabin. There was a big bonfire nearby, with a washtub of coffee on top. Carpenter had a newly installed bathroom, and he and Rosamond and Dorothy all described the excitement it generated. He wrote, "Everywhere guests rushed up to me and said: 'Happy Birthday! Show me the flush toilet!' " Mrs. Harrison gave the girls old flour sacks to carry their good dresses in, explaining that they could change out of their divided riding skirts when they arrived. Rosamond reported that she and Dorothy "met Mr. Perry . . . and a number of cowboys and settlers," and that Perry whisked them deftly through a quadrille. Still, "Mr. C.," who was dressed up in a tie and white shirt, "was a better dancer than Mr. P."



A supper of sandwiches, cake, and ice cream was served at midnight on a table outside. The dancing continued all night, and at 6 A.M. the company began to disperse. Rosamond said that as she rode home she realized it was "the first time in my life that I've seen the sun set, moon rise, the moon set, and the sun rise all in one night."

In September, Bob Perry, not to be outdone by Carpenter, invited the teachers for a weekend at his cabin and a tour of his mine. On a Friday afternoon, the teachers met him in Hayden, along with one of his sisters and a friend. They piled into Bob's little Dodge, and he drove them to Oak Creek, which, Dorothy wrote, consisted of "a coal mine and a miners' boarding house in a narrow gulch beside the RR, and Mr. Perry's house perched on a mountainside." This may have been a generous description of the hamlet, with its converging rail tracks, coal tipples, belching smoke, and barren hills.

Mining towns were known to be rough. In 1913, the violence in Ludlow had spread to the mines in Oak Creek. First, the state militia was called in, and then the 12th U.S. Cavalry, which remained for a year. At the height of the tensions, the Perry mine was surrounded by guard towers with machine guns and spotlights. Dorothy did not enjoy her tour. "I am glad to have done it, for I never need to go through another," she declared. "I was scared and didn't like it." It also rained all weekend. But Bob's low-slung cabin, its front porch strewn with saddle blankets and other paraphernalia, was comfortable and up-to-date, with electric lights, steam heat, and hot running water. He was an admirable host, calmly taking charge when his cook got sick. "We had most magnificent meals—even grouse for breakfast, duck and ice cream for dinner!" Dorothy exclaimed. The weather cleared long enough for Ros to take a picture of Bob leaning casually against the porch rail with one of his Airedales.

Life in Routt County was splendid, Dorothy wrote to Ros's mother: "The people out here have real living with none of the frills, which fill up so much of our lives at home." Mrs. Underwood and Mr. Woodruff, as it turned out, had supported the idea of the Western trip, though they worried about wild animals and bands of hostile Indians, notions that seemed even more absurdly overwrought in retrospect. But one Wednesday night in early October, as Perry was getting ready for bed, he stepped outside his cabin and was confronted by two men, one tall and one stocky, their faces masked by blue handkerchiefs. One pressed a rifle against his stomach; the other put a revolver to his head. Speaking with thick accents, they said, "Don't scare, don't scare, we want money," and they forced Perry inside. They took his wallet, some tobacco, a Colt .32, and a holster.

After binding his arms, they made him walk ahead of them at gunpoint through the rough backcountry. Eventually, they stopped for the night on a ridge not far from one of the Oak Creek mines. At dawn on Thursday, soon after the mine whistles blew, the tall man told Perry that he must write to his father and demand that he bring fifteen thousand dollars in gold by Sunday night.

"Dear Pop," Perry wrote:

> I do not understand it at all, except they are very definite as to what will happen to me if they do not get the money. They speak a foreign language which I cannot understand. It seems to me that they are "touched." Anything you will do is O.K. to me. If anything should happen to me, give my love to them all. For I have done all that I can. . . . You are to walk the hills straight west regardless of the roads, or, as they say, "as the sun hideth," and they will stop you some time during the day. They tell me we are to start walking tomorrow. —Bob

The tall man went into Oak Creek to mail the letter and returned with a sack containing several loaves of bread, a pound of butter, twelve cans of Tuxedo tobacco, some ham, and four pears. Perry had little appetite, but managed to eat some bread and butter. He was cold, and the tall man gave him his coat to wear.

They moved frequently, and on Friday, according to Perry's testimony at a later inquest in Oak Creek, he woke up at about 11 A.M. The stocky man, who was supposed to be guarding him, had dozed off. The rifle lay across his knees, his left hand resting over it. The taller man was lying on his right side; the edge of the holster holding Perry's automatic was visible under his jacket. Perry jumped over him and, though his arms were still bound, managed to seize the rifle from the stocky man. He backed up to a tree, angling the rifle at the kidnappers, and shouted at them to run or he would kill them. The tall man lunged toward him, and Perry fired once, hitting him in the chest and knocking him down. The man shouted in English, "I am shot," and stumbled toward his companion.

Perry ran in the opposite direction,

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stopping briefly to work his arms free, and several hours later he reached the closest ranch with a telephone and called his father. Samuel Perry, meanwhile, had obtained the fifteen thousand dollars in gold, enlisted four detectives from the Denver police force, and chartered a train. He received Bob's call as he was about to set off with the ransom, and immediately drove out to see him.

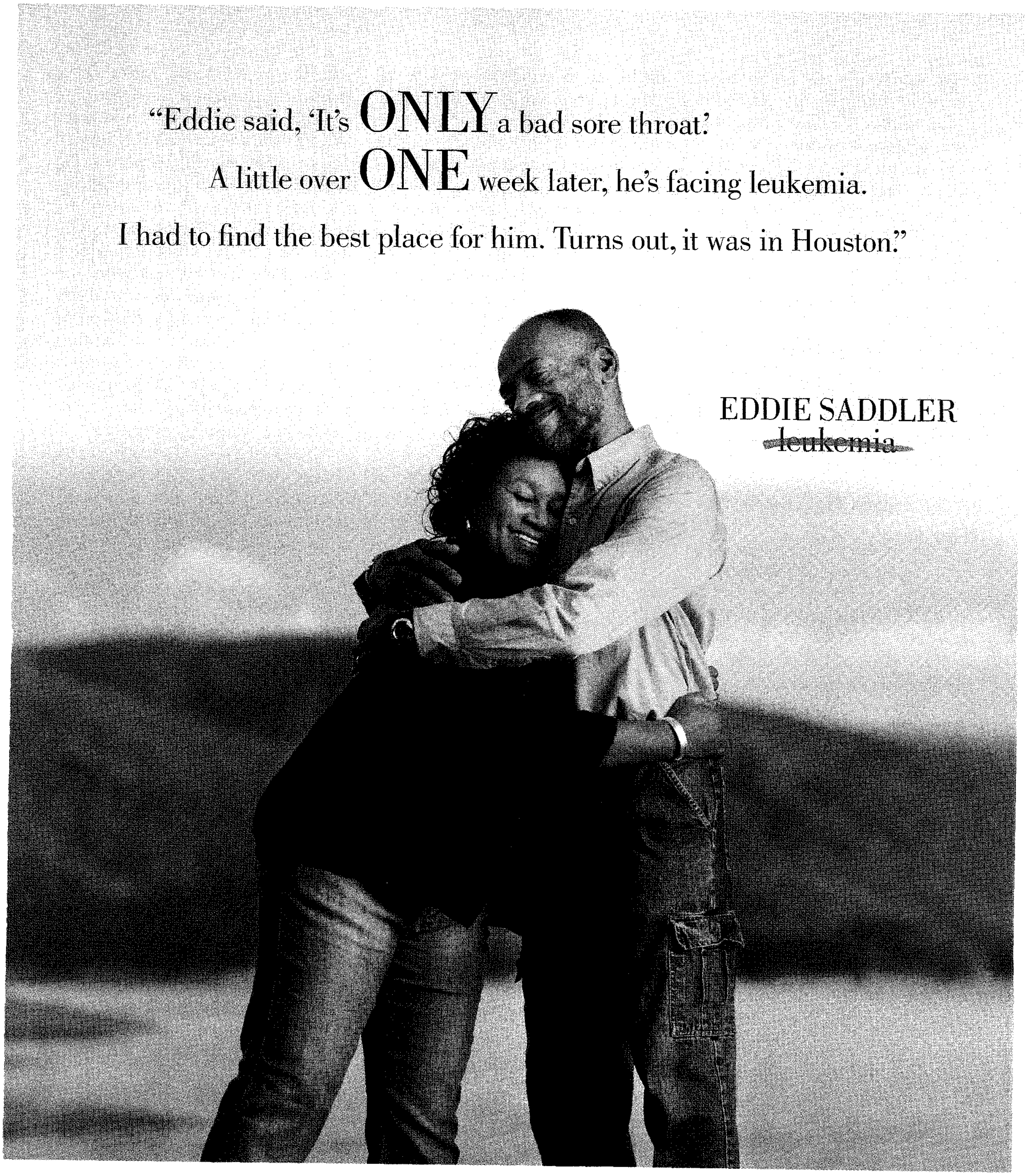
Several hours later, a posse found the body of the tall man in Little Middle Creek gulch, about ten miles from Oak Creek. A revolver was on the ground nearby. His clothing was in disarray, and there were two bullet holes, one through the chest—Perry's shot—and another through his right temple. He was identified as George Katsegahnis, a miner who had worked briefly for Perry in Oak Creek. The inquest determined that the bullet through the temple was the one that had killed him. The matter of who fired the fatal shot was never resolved. The owner of the Oak Creek Cemetery refused to allow Katsegahnis to be buried there, arguing, as an item in the Oak Creek *Times* put it, "We, as a people, do not want this class of citizens, dead or alive, in our midst." The second kidnapper, also a Greek miner, was captured a few days later. He was tried and convicted of kidnapping and "assault with deadly weapons with confederate." He was sentenced to life plus six and a half years in the state penitentiary.

Although the teachers had been distraught about Perry's kidnapping, they reassured their families that Elkhead was very safe. Dorothy wrote soothingly on October 26th, "Mother dear, When Mr. Carpenter & Mr. Perry came on Sunday, they brought our mail and I certainly was glad to get it." Perry had been to Denver, where he bought mackinaws and gloves for Ros and Dorothy. Carpenter, lacking presents and a story of heroic struggle with two desperadoes, fussed about the women's failure to bring woollen underwear for the winter. Dorothy wrote that Carpenter was "the best raconteur I ever heard" and "so picturesque not only in appearance but his vivid cowboy slang and such wonderful insight into human nature. It really is a treat to have him as a friend." As for "Mr. Perry," he "looks thinner & worn and of course it was thrilling to hear his account of the kidnapping—he carries the deadliest kind of a revolver now. . . . He doesn't go about alone. . . . I think his family are awfully nervous about him, but he doesn't seem to be." In Rosamond's photograph album, under a picture of Perry posing on horseback, rifle in hand, and wearing a bow tie, fedora, and jacket, she wrote "Hero No. 1." (Next to him is "Hero No. 2"—a candid shot of Carpenter on skis.) Rosamond was discreet about her growing affection for Perry, but Carpenter must have known that he had lost the competition.

He was also dismayed to discover that Dorothy had thwarted the other half of his matrimonial plan. Apparently, scrutinizing others' mail was one of his unofficial duties in Hayden, and he noticed that she received frequent letters in a male hand from an address in Michigan. Eventually, Dorothy confessed that she was secretly engaged to a young banker from Grand Rapids, Lemuel Hillman. He had proposed to her in Auburn, where she rebuffed him, and again, successfully, in Chicago, where she and Rosamond had stopped on their trip west. Eventually, she informed her parents, and her father—after receiving Hillman in Auburn in October and confirming that he had "high ideals, coupled with good business sense, and . . . sound judgment"—wrote to express his approval. In January, Dorothy wrote to her mother, "And now we come to the big news, which is Ros's engagement to Bob! . . . I am so happy about it!"

Suddenly, the two adventurers were planning traditional summer weddings in Auburn. Nevertheless, they were no longer sheltered young society women. Before they left for Colorado, they had ordered tweed riding suits from Abercrombie & Fitch, but as the weather got cold they were more concerned about warmth than about fashion. On November 13th, Rosamond wrote to her aunt Helen in Auburn, "We arose this morning with our thermometer registering twenty-two degrees below zero, cracked the ice in the pail and managed to take our cold sponge with shakes and shivers." In another letter, she described their unflattering outdoor wardrobes: "We wear enormous German socks over our shoes and our galoshes, men's size, countless tights, bloomers, fur coats, scarves and so forth. We can hardly heave ourselves into the saddle."

By contrast, some of the children had no shoes or socks. "Tommy had a torn shirt next to his skin, a ragged coat, and a duster around his neck," Dorothy wrote to her father. Rudolph Morsbach said cheerfully that he always ate radishes to keep him warm. Even "some of the fairly well-to-do ones are in rags because 'the


"Eddie said, 'It's ONLY a bad sore throat.'
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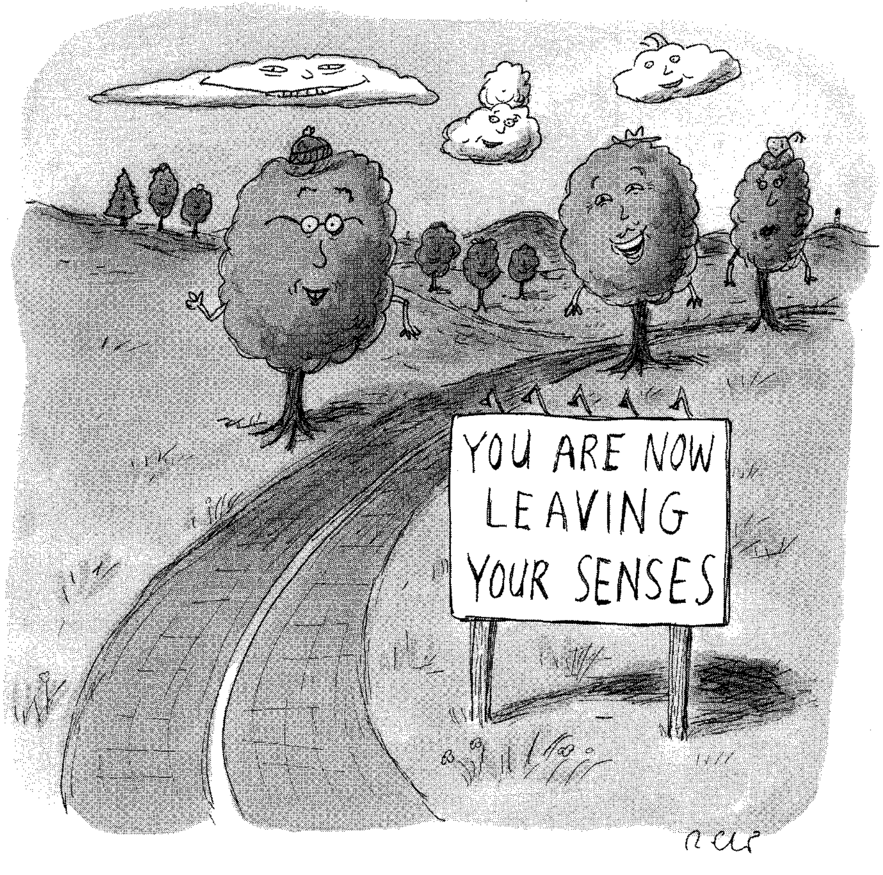
freight' hasn't come—the familiar cry out here while waiting for Sears Roebuck." This description prefaced a request for more supplies from Auburn. The Underwoods and the Woodruffs, their friends, and their churches had come to see Rosamond and Dorothy as missionaries, and routinely sent barrels of clothing, toys, and books.

By late December, it was frequently well below zero and snowing heavily almost every day. Lewis Harrison marked their path with willow whips, and broke the trail each morning—a small boy on a large white horse, up to its withers in snow, plunging through a vast rolling hillside of white. The children skied to school on barrel staves, propping them up against the outside wall as they came in. The older students wrote in their yearbook four years later that "in the morning there were always at least a dozen small boys holding a crying concert around the furnace."

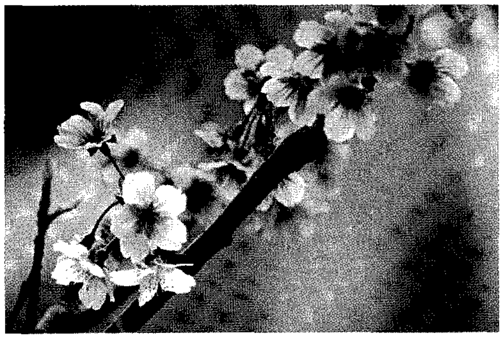
The big event of the winter was the Elkhead Christmas party, and the teachers spent much of December preparing for it. Ros's Camp Fire Girls organized a sale of homemade candies to raise money for costumes and dues, and she worked with her students on a play. Dorothy's students practiced Christmas carols, and she helped them get together a box of presents for the Children's Hospital in Denver. They donated their own treasures, including squirrel and porcupine skins, dried oak leaves, and an old Christmas card. On Christmas Eve, the teachers saw Isadore Bolten, a young Russian-Jewish homesteader and cobbler, who taught the boys regular classes in his trade, laboring up the hill on his skis, carrying a mail pouch full of Christmas presents from Auburn; Dorothy estimated that it weighed at least fifty pounds. The next day, several barrels were delivered, containing stockings for the children, caps, mittens, purses with money in them, toys, and candy. One of Rosamond's older students, Florence Jones, and several Elkhead parents helped the teachers decorate the Christmas tree.

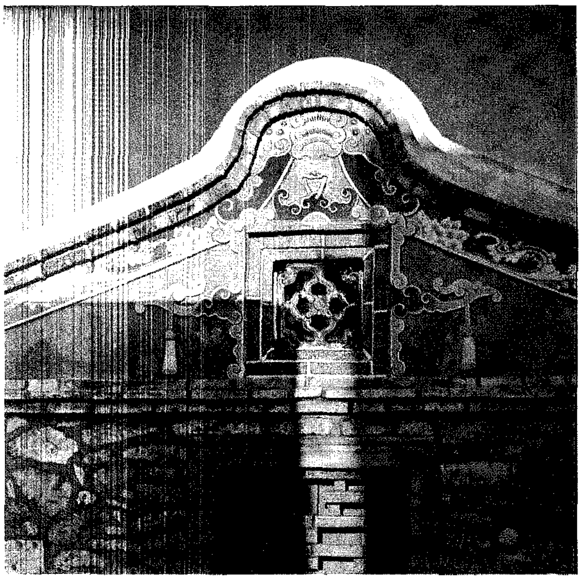
Families began arriving late on Christmas afternoon, during one of the worst blizzards of the winter. Dorothy wrote that people were "covered with snow, and half frozen; many of them having been on the road for hours. Some of them got way off the road, and even lost, so they never got there at all." The children were treated to their first Santa Claus—one of the homesteaders in full costume. The carols and the play were a success, although, Rosamond said, "babies wailed through the performance, and then proceeded to be sick—not that I wondered. We fed them aromatic spirits of ammonia, not knowing what else to do for them." Dorothy discovered Oliver Morsbach, Rudolph's seven-year-old brother, behind the piano "in a trance of joy—over a doll's tea set, probably intended for a girl and mixed up by mistake—but he *just loved it!*" The pianist didn't get there, but a fiddler did his best ("It was all pretty bad," Rosamond said). The dancing began at eight. Exhausted mothers put crying babies to sleep and then rolled them up in blankets and tucked them away so they wouldn't be stepped on.



At midnight, Ros and Dorothy slipped out and set off for home, although everyone else had prudently decided to spend the night at the schoolhouse. It was very dark, and about a mile from the Harrison ranch Dorothy's horse stumbled and fell in the deep snow. Chilled and frightened, the teachers put on the snowshoes they kept tethered to the saddles, and after considerable difficulty coaxed the horse back onto its feet. When they finally reached the ranch, they chopped through the ice in the buckets by the barn to water the horses. As soon as they entered the house, Dorothy said, "I know there's a bottle of whiskey here because I saw Old Man Harrison have some one night." In their former lives, they never would have thought of consuming hard liquor, but they hunted until they found the bottle, and each took a large swig. My grandmother told my brothers and me that the whiskey gave them "a good furnace inside," and that they fell into bed without removing their boots. The next morning, the Harrisons returned. As Rosamond recalled, one of them commented that the women must have had trouble on the ride home: "It was all written in the snow."

Contrary to Ferry Carpenter's expectations, Hayden and Elkhead did not prosper. Today, Elkhead has just eight year-round residents, two of whom, Cal and Penny Howe, live in a snug log house they built on the old Harrison property. Hayden is now a town of about sixteen hundred. Carpenter's law office, no longer inhabited, is sagging with age. His homestead at Oak Point was hit by lightning in 1978 and burned to the ground, but his grandson Reed Zars—an



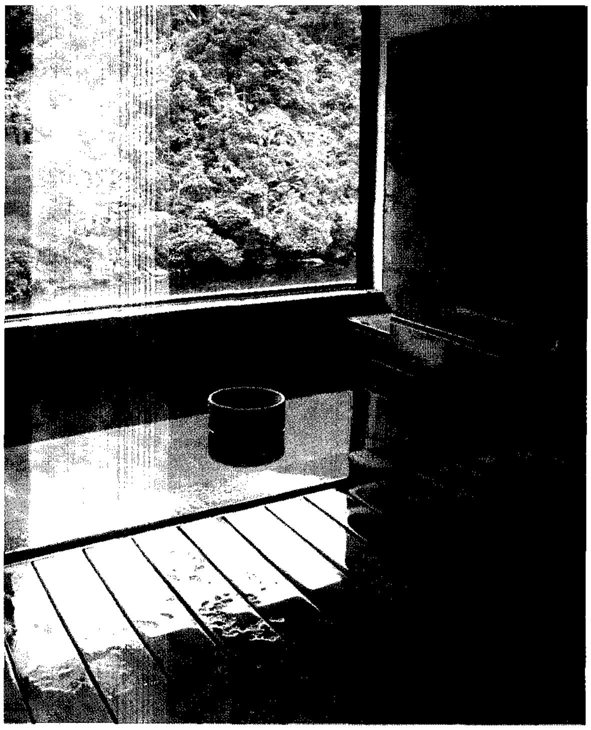


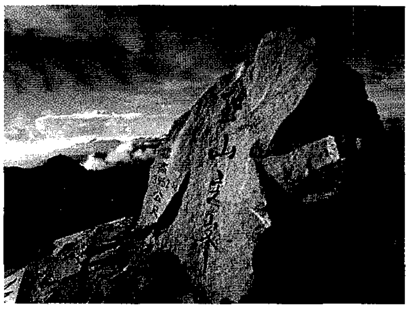
Travel expert Rudy Maxa recalls his recent tour of Taiwan through photos of some of the island nation's staggeringly beautiful natural landscapes. This is the third installment in our ongoing six-part series.

Formosa Taiwan

I LEANED MY HEAD BACK on the cool stone of the pool's edge. It was nearing midnight. Soaking in steamy mineral water, I watched the half-moon play hide-and-seek behind wind-blown clouds that skittered across its face. It was a perfect evening in Taitung County, Taiwan's hot-springs capital.

I was alone that night in the recuperative waters of the Hotel Royal Chihpen, a five-star resort in southeastern Taiwan that attracts visitors seeking to luxuriate and soak. Behind the hotel, I'd walked up a hill through jasmine-scented air along a path of smooth stones lined with purple and crimson azaleas and bougainvillea. I shed my hotel robe in a small dressing room, brushed aside a thin curtain, and passed into the warm December night. Within an enclosed area stood a pool filled by a constant stream of hot water, while, a few yards away, cold water continually supplied large ceramic soaking tubs.





That morning I had boarded a train in Taiwan's capital, Taipei. The tracks headed east toward the Pacific and then south along a coastline that has grown increasingly rugged by the time I disembarked at Xincheng Station. From there, I was only a ten-minute drive from the entrance of one of Taiwan's most spectacular natural sites, **Taroko National Park.**

Imagine a giant standing ankle-deep in the ocean, wielding an enormous axe. He strikes across the middle of the main island of Taiwan, slicing open a 3,000-foot-deep gash in the earth to reveal cliffs of marble. That's **Taroko Gorge,** located in one of the country's seven national parks. A geological phenomenon caused by continental plates colliding millions of years ago forced the mountains upward and created the **Central Mountain Range** that so captivates visitors today. The **Eternal Spring Shrine,** a short distance into the park, commemorates those who lost their lives building the park's serpentine road, now part of the **Central Cross-Island Highway** connecting the east and west coasts. (It has been blocked, however, since the big earthquake in 1999.)

The dramatic drive though the gorge takes visitors along swift-rushing streams, past waterfalls, and up and down the foothills of the Central Mountains. Sub-tropical forest vegetation is found in lower altitudes—trumpet lilies, crocuses, and azaleas. Hemlocks, spruces, and firs are higher up. At its narrowest point, a two-mile section of the gorge called the **Tunnel of Nine Turns** is pressed so tightly between sheer marble cliffs that only a slice of sky is ever visible above. Hundreds of species of butterflies make their home here, and well-marked trails offer hiking opportunities for all skill levels throughout Taroko National Park. The twelve-mile route from the tiny village of Tianxiang is perfect for bikers, heading down through the gorge and taking about three hours, giving riders what may be the best view of the park's natural beauty.

Beyond Taroko, at the southern tip of Taiwan, **Kenting National Park** offers a distinctively different landscape. Coral and limestone cliffs rim beaches of white sand, where sunbathers, divers, naturalists, and hikers can explore rain forests and unusual outcroppings. Hotels and restaurants in Kenting mark the jumping-off point for many visitors, who can choose from an additional menu of sea kayaking, sea canoeing, and fishing.

Bird-watching is the sport of choice on the park's freshwater **Longluan Lake,** a favorite spot for migrating ducks, geese, plovers, and snipes, and where Taiwan has its first ornithological museum. The entire island, in fact, is a bird-watcher's paradise, and nearly five hundred species have been identified. As many as sixty-five varieties reside in the Taipei Botanical Garden; in the Central Mountains and hot-springs region of Taitung, another 370 have been documented.

But it wasn't birds on my mind following my visit to Taroko Gorge. It was the dramatic drop-off on one side of the road as my guide drove me for nearly an hour from the city of Pingtung up into the mountains that are home to the Rukai tribe, one of Taiwan's indigenous peoples. (Though the road was modern, it wasn't until daylight the next day, when we drove back down, that I fully realized the heart-stirring distance from the side of the road to the valley below.)

I was headed for an overnight homestay in **Wutai Village,** and if I expected to find a place where electricity might be optional, I couldn't have been more mistaken. My lodging was called Dream House, a lovely B. and B. owned by a husband and wife who rent rooms to overnight guests. It was festooned with Christmas lights inside and out, and aboriginal carvings, tribal jewelry, and headdresses decorated its interior. Most homes in this village were constructed with slabs of local slate, and owners transform them with colorful statuary and art depicting serpents, animals, and mountain scenes, making for fascinating walks along the short, hilly streets.

Though my hosts spoke no English, a common language wasn't necessary as the mistress of the house gestured warmly, inviting me to a hearty meal of pork, rice, roasted sweet potatoes, and other vegetables.

When I first arrived in Taiwan a few days earlier, I had been struck by the city of Taipei's tree-lined boulevards and the thriving greenery of the basin in which it's situated. But the word "lush" had quickly taken on a larger meaning when I left the capital and made my several-day circle around Taiwan.

In Wutai Village set in the mountains under the stars, in the bold landscape of Taroko Gorge's marble boulders, and in the hot springs of Taitung under the moon, one finds the natural paradise that led Portuguese explorers to dub the island "Ilha Formosa," or "beautiful island.

Rudy Maxa is the host and executive producer of the public television series "Rudy Maxa's World."

For more information on Taiwan,
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Touch Your Heart

PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM TOP LEFT: CHERRY BLOSSOMS ©SHANG-MIN CHOU; DETAIL OF RESTORED HOUSE, WANAN ISLAND, PENGHU ©CHI-YEE CHEUNG; SHAKADANG RIVER, TAROKO GORGE ©LIAO CHEN/TAIWAN TOURISM BUREAU; HOT SPRINGS DETAIL ©LIM CHING YEE. *THIS PAGE:* JADE MOUNTAIN SUMMIT ©LI SHAN LU

environmental lawyer—rebuilt it, adding solar panels and a wind turbine.

Carpenter's hopes for the school district were partly realized. The Elkhead School's first year ended in April, 1917, when the children were needed at home on the farms. At a closing ceremony, the school board presented Rosamond and Dorothy with gold medals, inscribed with the words "For Bravery in Attendance, Loyalty in Work." The women left for Auburn the next day, and Carpenter promptly hired two successors, Ruth Bodfish and Delcina Neilson, from Massachusetts; a comfortable stone cottage for the teachers was completed a few hundred yards from the school. Both married local "boys."

On June 30, 1917, Rosamond Underwood married Robert Perry at St. Peter's Church in Auburn. Three days later, Dorothy married Lemuel Hillman at her parents' house, on Fort Street, and they settled in Grand Rapids. Bob and Ros lived in his cabin in Oak Creek for four years and then moved to Denver.

Ros told her grandchildren that the year in Elkhead had been the best in her life. Although Dorothy never said so, it was clear that she felt the same way. The experience also toughened her. One evening in February, 1930, when she and Lemuel were walking to a dinner party, he was struck by a car and killed. She had four young children and the Depression was setting in. To distract herself and to prepare for a job, she took a class in typing and stenography; later, she became the head of the local Red Cross chapter. Dorothy's older daughter, Caroline, remembers her going down to the Grand River when it overflowed and helping the Ottawa Indians, who had nothing to eat but muskrats. "She took life by the throat and dealt with it," Caroline said.

In 1920, Ferry Carpenter married Eunice Pleasant, whom he had recruited to the Elkhead School the year before. He went on to become the district attorney for Routt, Moffat, and Grand Counties, and one of the best-known cattle breeders in Colorado. In 1934, he was appointed by F.D.R.'s Interior Secretary, Harold Ickes, to be the first director of the Division of Grazing (now the Bureau of Land Management). Bob Perry died of pneumonia that year, at the age of forty-nine, but Ferry and Eunice kept up their friendship with Ros. In 1954, Eunice died, and a year later Ferry and Rosamond were married. It was four decades since he had lured her to Elkhead. They were nearly seventy years old. She moved from her Tudor house in Denver to the Carpenter Ranch, outside Hayden, where Ferry had first worked as an eighteen-year-old ranch hand.

That was also where I met them, in August, 1973. I spent my eighteenth summer working on a ranch in Carbondale, helping Rosamond's granddaughter Roz, who had three children. She took me to visit Ros and Ferry one day, and I learned that the ranchhouse had been assembled between 1902 and 1904 by joining four nearby homesteads, which were dragged to the site by mules. Ros, a gracious hostess, had become a good cook and served lunch on the sunny back porch.

Afterward, Ferry told me that he had something to show me. We climbed into his battered pickup truck, drove through Hayden, and began a long, jarring ride into the hills. At eighty-seven, he was still jocular and voluble, concentrating more on his stories than on his driving. The homesteaders, he told me, unable to make a living, were long since gone, their cabins dismantled and the lumber carted off to be used elsewhere. The Elkhead School had closed in 1938. Still, in 1920, at a time when only about fifteen per cent of students who started high school ended up graduating, of the six in the senior class four went to college and two to professional school. Lewis Harrison, the boy who had been the teachers' trail guide, became the chief forester for the State of Missouri. "Their impact was immediate, but above all lasting," Lewis wrote of Rosamond and Dorothy in 1977.

Ferry and I finally pulled up on a high ridge covered with sagebrush and scrub oak. As we walked around the schoolhouse, he identified the far-off peaks: Bears Ears, Agner Mountain, the Flat Tops. This February, I returned, escorted on a snowmobile by one of the homesteaders' grandchildren. The large windows were shuttered, but the sturdy stone building, which one teacher had described as "the school on top of the world," was otherwise mostly unchanged. ♦

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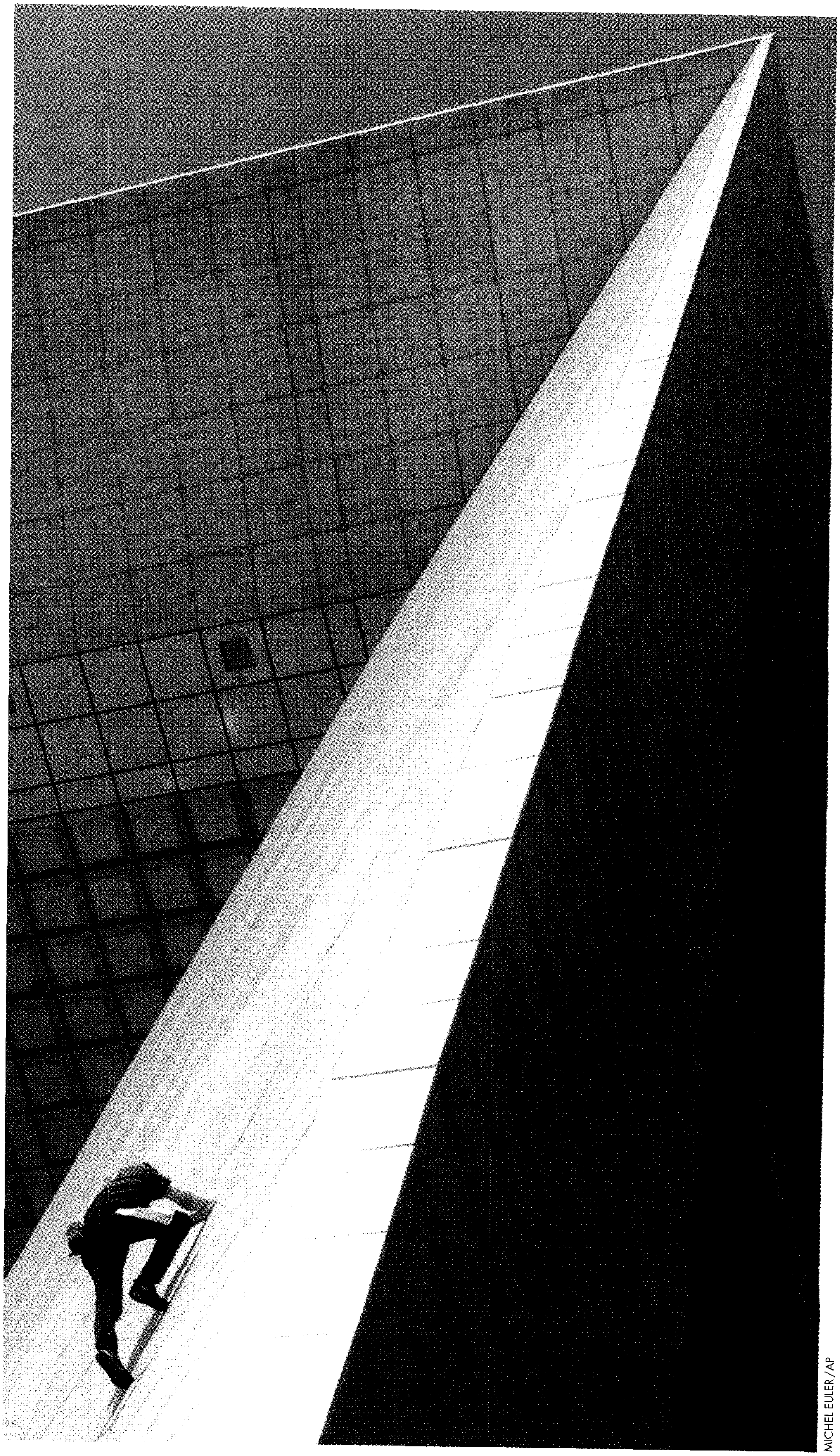


MICHEL EULER/AP

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE VERTICAL TOURIST

Alain Robert's obsession with skyscrapers.

BY LAUREN COLLINS

February 17, 2009, 1:10 P.M. As the thousands of bankers, consultants, and accountants who work in the Cheung Kong Center, a sixty-two-story office tower in Hong Kong's central business district, returned from their lunch breaks, a slight Frenchman named Alain Robert was being questioned in a windowless room on the tower's first floor. Robert sat in a plastic chair, surrounded by men in uniform. Three of them were members of the city's police force. Three others were private security guards for the building. Standing behind a desk, one of the guards videotaped the session. Another asked for Robert's passport.

"What is the reason you chose our building?" the guard said.

"It is a very beautiful building," Robert replied. "On the outside is amazing. Rarely is there that kind of surface." He was wearing skintight orange pants and a black T-shirt, upon which mites of grip chalk had settled, like dandruff. He went on, "Well, maybe, for the people all buildings are the same, but for me it's not like that." As he talked, he gesticulated, releasing puffs of chalk into the air.

Robert, who is forty-six, had just ascended the eastern face of the Cheung Kong, which is nine hundred and twenty-eight feet high, using nothing but his feet and his hands. He was thirsty, so the guards gave him a can of apple soda. "At the beginning, my rhythm was a bit too fast," he said. A phone rang. Robert continued, "The side I chose, it's the windy side. The front side is slightly more protected, and maybe nicer, but I didn't want to be above the main entrance. Then, they will be coming with the safety mattress. They think that if there is a mattress you can fall from the top of the sky and no one will get hurt. Which is bullshit."

The conversation stalled as the guards waited for a verdict from on high. Unofficially, they seemed to view Robert more as a curiosity than as a menace, or a boon, to society. ("Yeah, yeah, O.K.," the head guard replied, as Robert tried to explain that the climb had been motivated by a desire to draw attention to global warming.) In the way that baseball fans visit stadium after stadium, or that a pilgrim seeks the cathedral in every city, Robert, as a vertical tourist, has traversed the planet on a dogged, gutsy tour of the world's high-rises and, then, its jail cells and holding pens. Of the world's ten tallest buildings, he has climbed five. Most of the remaining half are in China, which he has been banned from entering since 2007, when he climbed the Jin Mao Tower (thirteen hundred and eighty-one feet), in Shanghai.

Robert at his home in Pézenas, France, photographed by Antoine Le Grand, and climbing the Grande Arche de la Défense, in 1999.

In Moscow, where Robert climbed the Federation Tower (seven hundred and ninety-five feet), he drank vodka with the police commissioner. In New York, a scrum of inmates once hoisted him on their shoulders after seeing a clip of him climbing 101 Park Avenue (six hundred and twenty-nine feet) on the jailhouse TV. When, in London, Robert was arrested at One Canada Square (seven hundred and seventy-one feet), in Canary Wharf, a bobby treated him to a fry-up of sausage, eggs, and beans. His trespasses are crapshoots, and the response to them varies according to the jurisdiction, and the caprice of whoever is presiding over it on a given day. Boosting himself over the parapet of the Shinjuku Center (seven hundred and thirty-one feet), in Tokyo, Robert says, he was greeted with a punch in the face. After climbing partway up the Petronas Twin Towers, in Kuala Lumpur—"my Everest," Robert wrote in an autobiography, "With Bare Hands"—he spent two days in jail before being equipped with a driver and a Mercedes, and presented to the king.

It's hard to picture Robert at a state dinner—he showed up for his audience with the Malaysian royals bare-chested, except for a lizard-skin vest. At five feet four inches, he is no skyscraper, but if he were a building he might be Santiago Calatrava's Turning Torso: sinewy; awry (he has broken his nose four times); tending immediately to enchant or to repel. Robert weighs a hundred and fourteen pounds. He wears his hair below his shoulders. (His chief sponsor is Norgil, the hair-augmentation company.) Ever since a fortune-teller in Bangkok suggested that he was a Native American in a past life, he has favored a Wild Western look. The first time I met him, he was wearing a pair of high-waisted leather pants. A feather-shaped earring dangled from his left ear, and around his neck a chunk of turquoise hung on a black cord. His thighs are the width of handrails. His posture is atavistic, with powerful shoulders and a tiny waist, as though his body were composed of the adverse parts of a matchup toy.

Gérard Hoël, a surgeon who has performed more than ten operations on Robert, has called him "a medical enigma, one of excellent functional outcome in spite of an unimpressive anatomical result." Though his face—lined with glacial crevasses—is striking, it is his hands and his arms that indicate the wondrousness, and the wages, of his sport. According to Hoël, the movement of Robert's elbows is limited, his radius and ulna have separated, his wrists are inflexible, and he can no longer straighten his fingers, having jammed them into too many crannies, for too long. (As a popular YouTube clip proves, Robert can perform a full pull-up by inserting a single middle finger into a hole in a cliff.) His hands are small and heftless, like flippers. A knobby calcification protrudes from his right wrist, as if someone had cut a golf ball in half and implanted it under the skin. Robert also has vertigo. "He can't really walk in a straight line unless he's climbing upward," Julie Cohen, who made a 1998 documentary, "The Wall Crawler," about Robert, and has since served as his sometime agent, says. "He needs a lot of help in the horizontal world."

In the security room, Robert cracked his knuckles and eyed John Pickavant, a lawyer who represents him in Hong Kong. "John, what do you think?" he said.

"I think you may have to give them a sort of promise," Pickavant, a Liverpudlian expatriate, replied. "You've done it now twice."

Robert had already free-soloed the Cheung Kong Center once, in June, 2005. "Free-soloing" is the mountaineer's term for climbing alone, without implements or ropes, and Robert is one of perhaps a few dozen dedicated practitioners in the world. "Free-soloing is a very élite, esoteric subdivision for obvious reasons—you fall, you die," Matt Samet, the editor of *Climbing*, said. It is an aesthetic pursuit, with a moral basis: dying, full-heartedly, is better than a half-assed life. To Robert, safety contrivances are a form of bondage, and the prerogative of self-reliance distinguishes men from marionettes. "I am not a circus animal, not a puppet, but a rock climber who has consciously chosen freedom!" he writes. (On safety nets: "If you want to slice and dice me into little cubes for a Spiderman casserole, then, sure, the net is fantastic. The effect would be like making a serve with a worm instead of a shuttlecock in a game of badminton.") Of the very few free-soloers who climb on steel and glass, rather than rock, Robert, "the French Spiderman," is the most audacious, a high-altitude Jesse James. The professional climber Ivan Greene told me, admiringly, "When he came to New York, my home town, and climbed the New York Times Building, I was like, 'Dick!' "

Robert climbed the Times building last June. The façade is wrapped in ceramic rods, which are intended to block heat but effectively function as a ladder's rungs. On a scale of difficulty from one to ten, Robert rated it a .5. Within hours of his ascent, Renaldo Clarke, a computer technician from Sunset Park, had also made the climb, supposedly to raise awareness of malaria. (*Daily News* headline: "WACKY TIMES FOR 2 NUT-JOBS IN HI-RISE DRAMA.") A neighbor of Clarke's told the *Post*, "Wow, he upstaged a professional and said, 'Here ya go, Frenchie!' " Robert was equally unimpressed by the amateur. He said later, "I was just thinking, Fuck. If he falls, I'm in big, big shit."

The daredevils, in tandem, irritated civic officials. Mayor Bloomberg pronounced them "stupid." Peter Vallone, Jr., a city councilman who is the chairman of the city's Public Safety Committee, suggested that Robert add "the walls of his jail cell at Rikers" to his list of conquests. Eventually, a grand jury indicted Clarke on criminal charges, but another held Robert accountable for only a disorderly-conduct violation. (Both men performed community service.) Five weeks later, a third man attempted to climb the building. He stalled at the eleventh floor. At his arraignment, a judge said, "If you want to kill yourself, find some nice quiet bridge in Connecticut in some hick town." In September, the City Council passed "anti-Spidey" legislation to prevent climbing and jumping from the city's buildings.

Robert's chagrin was short-lived: two weeks after the Times caper, he climbed the Dresdner Bank tower for the German television show "Unglaublich!" At the request of his sponsor, Robert wore a harness, along with a promotional T-shirt. Over the years, he has done climbs to publicize razor blades and shopping complexes. When he climbed the Jin Mao Tower, he did it wearing a red-and-blue unitard. Robert's fee can be as high as fifty thousand dollars, but he has settled for far less, and the lack of discrimination with which he fields paying gigs, along with his flashy style, has led his detractors to accuse him of being a sellout, or—in the words of a YouTube commenter—"just another French media whore." It is true that Robert's climbs, even the unsponsored ones, are not immune to mercenary concerns: he avoids climbing on Mondays, he told me, because the weekend staff people at newspapers often fail to pass on the tip that he customarily calls in. Climbing tall buildings is inherently an exhibitionist act—skyscrapers, unlike Denali or El Capitan, tend to house the sorts of powerful corporations that interest the media, and, occasionally, the media themselves. It is probably not a coincidence that when Robert targeted Canary Wharf in 1995 he knocked on the window, asking for a glass of water, at L!ve TV's floor.

For all his showmanship, Robert is ingenuous about his image and his finances. Pickavant helps him out when he's in Hong Kong, but Robert retains no full-time counsel. He fields his calls himself ("I'm spending my life on my BlackBerry"), he has taught himself English through novels ("The Da Vinci Code," "Bridget Jones's Diary"), and he travels as lightly as a day-tripper (and, unless someone else is paying, in coach). He will show up in a faraway city with little guarantee other than a few telephone conversations. When on the eve of the Cheung Kong climb an acquaintance suggested to Robert that he require a non-refundable deposit from potential sponsors, he seemed puzzled. It had never occurred to him to demand a few thousand dollars in exchange for a promise to clear his calendar, and to risk his life.

At Cheung Kong, Li Ka-shing, the billionaire landlord, had happened to be on the premises during Robert's climb. From his private apartment on a low floor, he had called the head guard. Robert was absolutely dying for an audience with the tycoon.

"Please, it would be a privilege," he said.

The guard announced that Mr. Li had agreed to release Robert, but that he would not be able to see him. Despite having clambered from sea level past the treetops half an hour earlier, and got away with it, Robert seemed crestfallen. The guards escorted him to the sidewalk. He was swarmed by well-wishers and photographers, which improved his spirits. By two-thirty, still in his climbing gear, he was eating pizza and drinking champagne in a waterfront mall. When he asked Pickavant how he thought the climb had gone, Pickavant replied, "You were Jack Flash today."

In Hong Kong, Robert was staying at a modest hotel in Wan Chai, the former red-light district. On the morning of the climb, he convened a press conference, which consisted of a handful of local reporters and him, sitting on a leather couch with a half-finished bottle of orange juice. Robert was tense. His left shoulder, which he had pulled while climbing in Qatar, in December, hurt. Reuters hadn't shown. "Without the media, there is no point," he muttered. "It is like a waste of time." For days, the weather in Hong Kong had been abysmal. Moisture settled everywhere, as if the entire city were a bathroom mirror. Mist—sludge, for the tropics—was implacable. The skyline, steaming and shrouded, could have been made of dry ice.

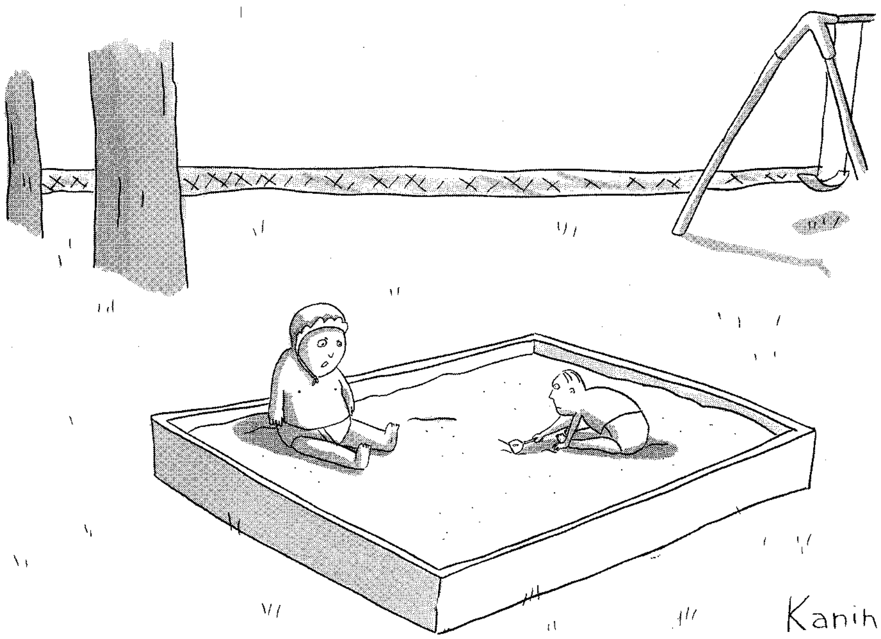
Robert always gets two questions: "Are you afraid of heights?" and "What does your wife think?" Robert, who is not afraid of heights, and his wife, Nicole, a hospital administrator, live in Pézenas, a village in the South of France. They met in 1982, and they have three sons (Julien, twenty-one, and Hugo, eighteen, who have both joined the Army, and Lucas, fourteen, a high-school student). Nicole does not like the danger, and the long stretches away from home, that her husband's occupation entails, but she accepts it as an essential part of his character. "I know perfectly the consequences," she told me, through Alain. "But I don't feel the right to tell him all over again each time, 'Alain, you shouldn't do this, you shouldn't do that.' "

In June, 1994, a film director offered to feature Robert in a documentary on adventure sports that he was making for a watch company. The director thought that it would be striking to juxtapose the sandy columns of the Southwest against the "glass mountains" of one of America's big cities. Would Robert, an accomplished rock climber, be willing to try an office tower? "It sounds pretty cool," Robert replied. "Why not?" Training proved a challenge: the most formidable structure in Pézenas was a three-story house. (Robert climbed it and found a tennis ball on the roof.) Still, within six weeks he was standing atop Chicago's Citigroup Center. The reflection of the sun on the building's mirrored panes had thrown him off—"I am like an ant scurrying around under a magnifying glass," he wrote—but it was an "irrevocable" experience. He was hooked.

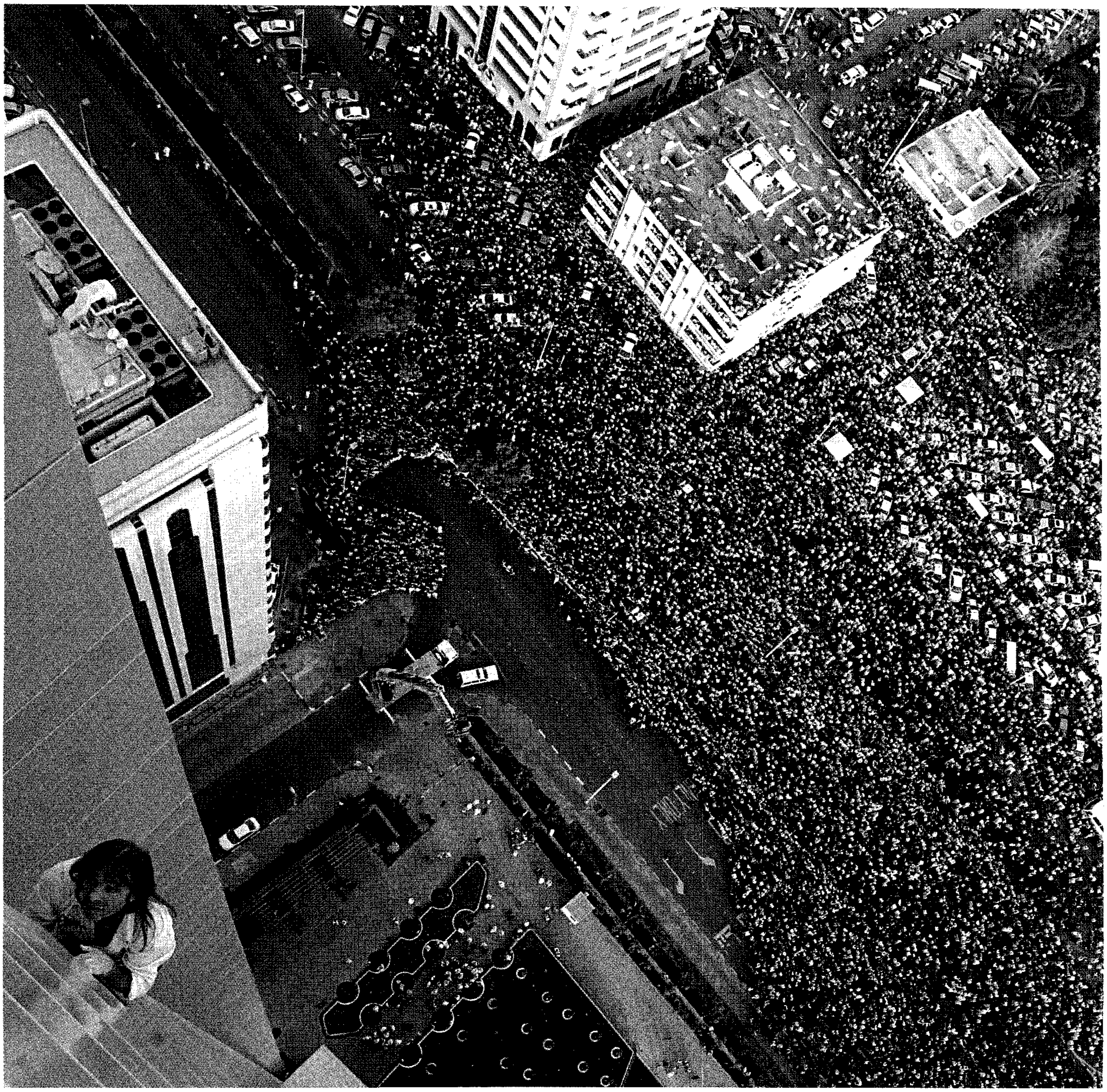
Robert had been working part time at a sports shop. Soon, he devoted himself to his new infatuation. "It's always a great enjoyment, because you are feeling a lot of freedom, and you are just putting your life from the tips of your fingers to do something interesting," he told me.

At the press conference, a reporter for the Hong Kong *Standard* asked why he was making the climb. Robert spoke at length about climate change, and then said, "It shows that I am willing to give a big part of myself for something that I have a strong belief." (If Robert is retailing environmental responsibility, he's something of a loss leader, flying all over the world to encourage other people not to.) When I asked Julie Cohen about his motivations, she laughed and said, "He always gives really corny answers: 'I climb ze mountain because it is zere.' . . . But it's actually that. He can't *not*." The necessity of the ordeal, for Robert, is self-evident. Another YouTube commenter, after watching a video of the Cheung Kong climb, quoted Chris Rock: "That tiger ain't go crazy. That tiger went tiger!"

If the psychological origins of Robert's quest are nonconformist, its political underpinnings are libertarian. "Pok-



"It turns out I just wasted the whole morning networking with a dog."

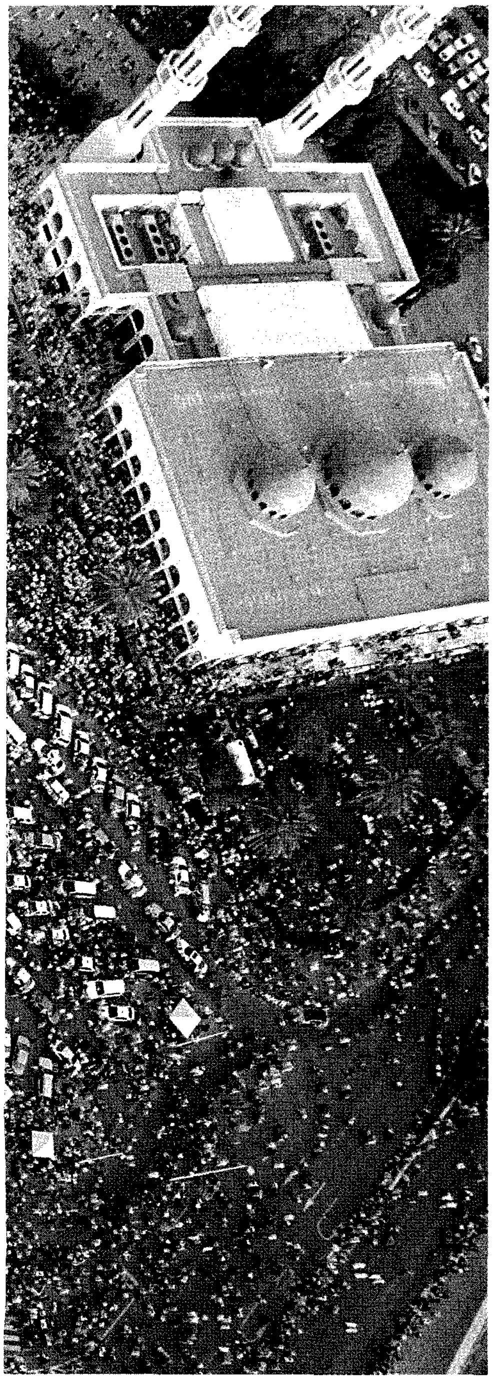


Robert scaling the façade of the ADIA *Tower, in Abu Dhabi, in 2007. He always gets two questions: "Are you afraid of heights?" and*

ABACA

ing this wasp's nest, just to gauge the reaction of the powers that be, motivates me enough to take the risk of being jailed," he has written—or, as he told me, "I enjoy kicking the ass of society." Robert abhors what he sees as his compatriots' bourgeois complacency, their willingness to cede their autonomy to the state. "The French, they don't do anything," he said. "They know they are going to get paid—they just need to go to the bar every day to play the horse race." He continued, "Some people do prefer to have a fucking boring life, just being sure at the end of the month they're going to have a paycheck."

Contemptuous as Robert is of weakness in the abstract, he has a delicate heart, and he identifies with the world's downtrodden. He is guileless, in a way that can be uncomfortable to witness: in Hong Kong, a man approached him and asked for money, telling him he had a "lucky face." Robert appeared genuinely flattered. At times, his idealism can seem callow—in "With Bare Hands," which was edited and adapted by John Chan, he recounts how he invited a group of street urchins to one of Rio de Janeiro's fanciest restaurants. The *favelados* were barefoot, so Robert took off his shoes, too, and demanded that the host seat them. If the restaurant represented to him "exactly the type of bullshit that rich people find compulsory," one has to wonder why he was compelled to visit it, other than to provoke. Over the years, his causes have included racial discrimination and the oppression of Native Americans. In 1999, he climbed the Obélisque in Paris's Place de la Concorde wearing T-shirts that bore the



"What does your wife think?"

likenesses of Abbé Pierre, the Dalai Lama, Geronimo, and Che Guevara. His enterprise is similar to the graffitist's: by using the attributes of the urban landscape in an unintended way, he is able to make a statement.

Hong Kong, which Robert visits often, makes an appealing canvas. It is one of the world's tallest cities, with thirty-one towers of more than seven hundred feet. For a person with an aerial orientation—"My dad is spending his whole life watching in the air," Julien once remarked to Nicole—Hong Kong is a paradise, nurturing, on its skyline, the same biodiversity that Darwin observed in the Galápagos. (Islands are as hospitable to skyscrapers as they are to flora and fauna.) "Most of these buildings are shiny, are vertical, are slippery," Robert said. "For me, they are like a big diamond."

At the press conference, Robert did not let on which building he would strike. After about an hour, he adjourned the session and jumped into a waiting taxi, which proceeded toward the Cheung Kong Center along a predetermined route. The previous day, Robert had scouted his approach. In his hotel room, he had checked the weather obsessively. "This is horrible," he said, clicking on the BBC Web site, which showed a diffuse cloud. Taking off a turquoise snakeskin jacket and running a comb through his hair, he looked in the mirror: "This is more discreet, right?" Then he invited me to join him for a stakeout.

Downstairs, Robert hailed a cab. "Don't say Cheung Kong, say Bank of China," he instructed me. In the cab, he tilted his neck and pressed his face to the window, like a houseplant straining toward the sun. We got out at the Bank of China, walked past some security guards, and got into an elevator. "It is very slow, this lift," Robert said. "I was inside the lifts of the Burj Dubai, the fastest ones on earth."

On the forty-third floor, from an observation deck, we looked out on an expanse of pylons and penthouses, stretching from the city's foothills to the South China Sea. Hong Kong is an exceptionally dense city, with ninety thousand people per square mile in places, well above Manhattan. Apartment buildings commonly reach sixty stories, and their inhabitants are as intimate with the city's architectural physical features as their forebears were with its peaks and inlets. Many of the buildings have pet names or backstories: the Convention and Exhibition Center (the Ski Jump), the Far East Finance Center (the Amah's Tooth), the Australian-designed Lippo Building (the Koala Tree), the portholed Jardine House (the House of a Thousand Assholes). The jackknife-shaped Bank of China (the Cleaver Building) was, upon its opening, faulted by feng-shui practitioners for emanating negative chi—the building has sharp edges, and its orientation to the HSBC Building is said to be belligerent. From it, we looked directly upon the eastern face of the Cheung Kong Center, which, owing to its intentionally accommodating design, is known as the Box That the Bank of China Came In.

Designed by Cesar Pelli, the Cheung Kong Center is a glass-clad rectangle overlaid with a decorative grid of stainless-steel bars. Its corners are chamfered, to create an effect of continuity, and the window panels are coated with a silvery finish. Li Ka-shing had wanted a harmonious building, and so, to determine its height, the architects drew a line between the apexes of the Bank of China and HSBC. Cheung Kong's tenants include McKinsey & Company, Deutsche Bank, and Goldman Sachs. It projects stolidity and order. It resembles, basically, a pencil case wrapped in three-dimensional graph paper.

Robert assessed his target intently, tracing potential climbing routes on the window of the observatory with an index finger, like a football coach mapping out plays on a whiteboard. "Maybe it is nicer if I move more on the north side, because we can see the sea," he said. The clouds were still woolly, but we could make out the top of the building. "For you, this is an unusual sight," Robert said. "For once, you are watching from above. You understand what is forty-three stories, and, still, we are far away from being the top." He shifted his eyes toward the bottom of the building and began mentally to ascend it, counting off stories. "If I'm going to cross over—yep," he said. "Let's go down."

Robert wanted to touch the building. He led me to a covered pedestrian overpass that connects the Bank of China to the Cheung Kong Center, entering it from the side closer to the harbor. We approached the building. Posing as a passerby, Robert swiped a palm against the glass. Earlier, he had assessed a rail, shaking it, and run his hands up and down the length of a silver post. "If you put water on it, it's not nice," he said.

The smallest architectural details—air-conditioning units, silicon fillings, a kind of rubber window joint that Robert has encountered in the Middle East—can be man-made scree, hampering

Robert's ascent of a building, or making it impossible to climb without aid. Considering the number of things that can go wrong, his reconnaissance methods are surprisingly low-tech: he scouts a building on the skyscraper Web site Emporis.com and then shows up at the site. (Years ago, his methods were more elaborate. When he hoped to penetrate the National Library, in Paris, he brought along a companion in "an absolutely devastating miniskirt.") Every building, according to Robert, has a vulnerability, and it was obvious that the Cheung Kong's was its heavily textured façade. "The good thing is that there is some ledge, some groove," Robert said. "But it's kind of slippery."

Part of the allure of scaling buildings has always been the thrill of the heist. "The roof climber must dodge the proctors, with their attendant evil the bulldogs, on their nightly prowl round the streets of Cambridge," the pseudonymous author Whipplesnaith wrote, in a 1937 treatise entitled "The Night Climbers of Cambridge." He asserted, "For an outlaw he is, and unless he take the common precautions of outlawry there will be trouble." Robert had warned me not to speak English as we cased the premises, but he disregarded his own instructions. Philippe Petit, in advance of his 1974 tightrope walk, had gone so far in the name of caution as to arrive at the World Trade Center on crutches. Robert was wearing red leather pants. I was getting nervous. "It's just that I don't really care, and I feel like I'm transparent," he said.

February 17, 2009, 12:10 P.M. Shoving some bills into the driver's hand, Robert got out of the cab and walked briskly toward the pedestrian overpass. Secured around his waist by a purple bungee cord and a carabiner were two nylon pouches—one for chalk, and the other holding a cell phone, some pieces of string, and a squirt bottle containing a mixture of water and Red Bull. Approaching the property, Robert vaulted onto a low railing. From there, he pulled himself onto the roof of the footbridge and dashed toward the building. Grabbing hold of a protruding stanchion, he began scurrying up the face, like a cockroach eluding the sole of a loafer. For Robert, the beginning is the least physically perilous part of a climb but the most crucial to its success or failure. Within seconds, he was beyond capture.

He climbed methodically, hand over hand, high on his calves. It is said that one can tell a skilled climber by how he uses his feet, not his hands. Robert pointed his toes and planted them precisely. He raised his knees more than ninety degrees. Bands of ornamental ledges jutted from the façade, the way gargoyles would on a Gothic building. When he reached one, he would pause, turn to the left, and survey the city, like a sailor scanning the horizon from the top of a mast.

Not quite ten stories up, Robert stopped. He reached into his shirt and produced a large yellow banner, affixing its top right corner to the building with one of the pieces of string. He did the same with the upper left corner. Straddling a bar, he inched down to tether the bottom half of the banner. He pulled at its edges, to make sure it was secure. It said "OneHundredMonths.org," referring to a climate-change Web site. He looked up, and started climbing again. After about ten minutes, he appeared, from the ground, microscopic—a specimen on a slide.

Nearby, on the forty-eighth floor of Citibank Plaza, an investment banker named Benjamin Ensminger-Law was sitting at his desk, drafting term sheets. The forty-eighth floor is bisected by elevators, and fixed-income trading, Ensminger-Law's division, occupies the north portion, which includes a bank of windows with sweeping views toward Kowloon. People started gathering near Ensminger-Law's desk. He wasn't quite sure what they were looking at. Eventually, a colleague in the next row gestured toward Robert's banner, on the opposing Cheung Kong Building, and pointed out that, just above it, was a man.

Ensminger-Law put down his project. He was pretty sure that the climber had to be the French Spiderman. He was excited, both to witness someone climbing the building and also in the way that people get around celebrities, or maybe when they first go somewhere they've seen in photographs or at the movies. We're so used to having these two spheres in our lives, he thought—the real physical world around us, the world we inhabit, and this other world,

"There goes your knighthood."

which is in some ways just as real, but which we experience only in a kind of second order. It was interesting to see something familiar in an unfamiliar context. Ensminger-Law had always felt this way about scuba diving on shipwrecks.

Below, on the overpass, a crowd had gathered.

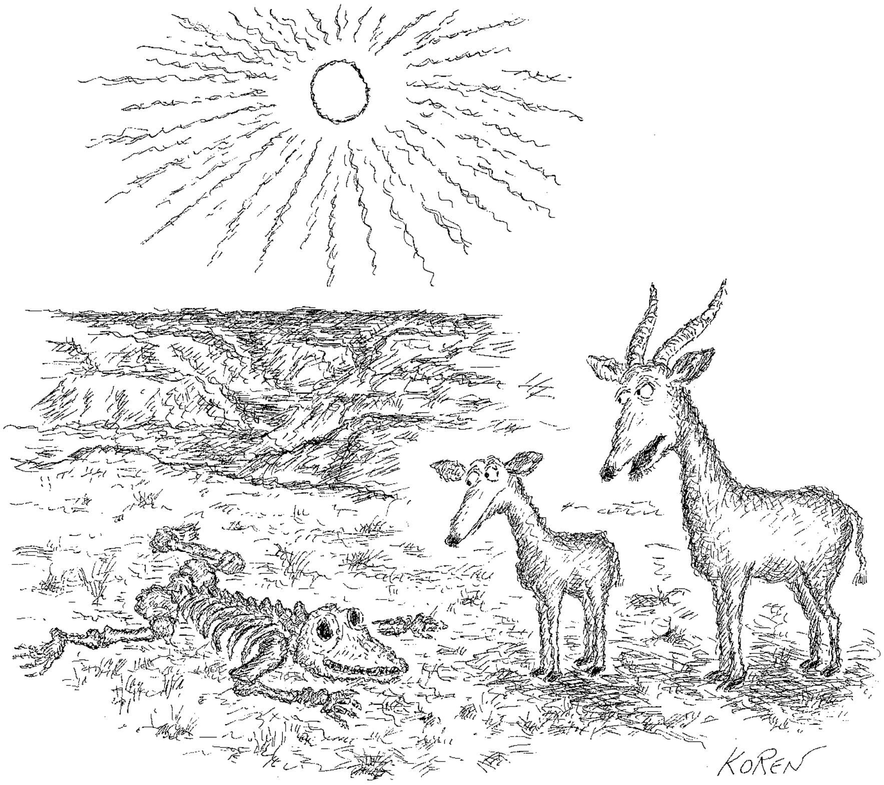
"He's mad," someone with an Australian accent said.

Around twelve-thirty, the sun came out, turning the building's cladding the color of pennies. As Robert climbed higher, cumulus clouds scrolled behind him, like a screensaver. He took a drink. A bird coasted on the wind below.

As a boy, growing up in Valence, about sixty-five miles south of Lyon, Robert had wanted to be Zorro, Robin Hood, or D'Artagnan. His father was a phone-company representative, his mother a housewife. He was a shrimp. When he was nine, he saw the movie "The Mountain," about two brothers who serve as a rescue party when an airplane crashes near their village. Robert adjusted his career aspirations: from then on, he wanted to be the Spencer Tracy character, a brave hero battling for survival against the direst of odds.

He got his chance at the age of twelve. Returning home from school one afternoon, he realized that he had lost his keys. The family apartment—Robert, the second son, has two brothers and a sister—was seven flights up, with a loggia window that was always left unlocked. Robert climbed up and let himself in. A concierge reported the break-in to his mother, who scolded him. Robert feels that his father, with whom he had a distant relationship, began to view him with respect.

Robert nicknamed the apartment building Ailefroide, after a treacherous peak in the Massif des Écrins. He and some like-minded friends began transforming the neighborhood into an Alpine-Himalayan fantasyland: with borrowed spelunking equipment, they turned three back-yard trees into a Tyrolean traverse; rock heaps became Doigt de Dieux and Annapurna. Every weekend, they ran off to the countryside, where, Robert writes, "we imposed on ourselves a tough and punishing ethic, rough, daring, and foolhardy." They went canyoning, before canyoning existed. In winter, they would pile on woollen sweaters, pack baguettes in ten plastic bags, and spend all day scampering up frozen waterfalls.



"The message here is 'Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate!'"

Soon, Robert—along with a friend and a copy of the magazine *Mountains*—attempted his first official escalation, of the limestone cliffs at Château de Crussol, a twelfth-century castle in the Ardèche region. The climb, which was rated extremely difficult, was, to their surprise, a success. Having honed their skills in isolation, they were better than they knew. They began free-soloing routes across the Vercors Plateau. After a few years, Robert's friend decided to become a policeman, and Robert, heartbroken, began climbing by himself. When he was twenty-two, he completed L'Abominable Homme des Doigts, a face rated 7b+, the highest level, at the time, he says, for a free-solo. In 1992, two years before he started climbing buildings, he combined that route with two others, L'Abomifreux (7c) and L'Abominafreux (8a). "Climbing out of the Verdon is insane. It's scary to think about," Alex Honnold, a twenty-three-year-old Californian who is one of the world's best free-soloers, told me of Robert's exploits in France. "And he did it years ago. Super impressive."

Robert had not had the opportunity to travel much, so part of the appeal of climbing very tall buildings was that it was by definition cosmopolitan—you couldn't do it by yourself in the woods. "I have opened myself to the whole world, instead of just climbing all alone," he told me. "Maybe I was a little bit of an introvert when I was young. I won't say now that I am an extrovert, but something has really changed in my way of being with people."

An entertainer as much as an explorer, Robert operates in the tradition of street performers—jugglers, sword swallowers, fire-eaters, mimes—who, through extraordinary feats, attempt to imbue the impersonal city with humanity and mirth. Rich Gottlieb, the owner of Rock and Snow, in New Paltz, and a wise man of the Shawangunks, said that he considers Robert "almost a physical muckraker, there to just break us right out of our shells." A Robert climb is essentially a circle show, an act that draws a crowd. Last June, some reporters for the *Times* were sitting at their cubicles, on the fourth floor, when Robert shot by. Across Eighth Avenue, a construction worker, standing on a higher floor of an unfinished building, held up a phone number on a handwritten sign. When one of the reporters called it, the construction worker picked up his cell phone and narrated the rest of the ascent. By extending the urban landscape in a new direction, up, Robert had created a place for strangers to bump into each other—a sidewalk in the sky.

For everyone who is delighted by the antics of the provocateur—Blondin, the *funambule*, cooked an omelette while traversing Niagara Falls—there is another person who finds him feckless or cavalier. This depends both on the skill of a given performance and on the frequency with which the act is performed. In the early part of the century, Harry Gardiner—reportedly partial to climbing buildings in a white duck suit, tennis shoes, and rimless spectacles—gained notoriety as the Human Fly, spawning a wave of copycat acts. In 1923, after a man fell nine stories from the Hotel Martinique, the New York City Council passed an ordinance preventing "street exhibitions of a foolhardy character in climbing the outer walls of buildings by human beings." It continued, "It seems desirable to . . . prevent performance in which human life is needlessly imperiled to satisfy either . . . an insane desire for vainglory or money on the part of those directing or executing that sort of exhibition." When the hurdy-gurdy man plays, someone is always trying to take a nap.

Robert has had to be rescued twice in his career: in 1999, on the Grande Arche de la Défense, by firemen (he overheated); and in 2002, at Canary Wharf, by a window cleaner (wind and rain trapped him on the thirty-fifth floor). When he fails, it is at the property owner's, or the taxpayers', expense, and public opinion can be jeering. "ALLEZ OOP," one headline read, after the Canary Wharf mishap. "Much as he says he enjoys climbing, it didn't seem that way," the building's spokeswoman told the *Express*. "I don't know if he was crying or screaming for help." Were he to fall, Robert could endanger lives other than his own. The possibility is enough to occasionally mitigate his plans, but not to cause him to desist from them altogether. "If there is one side of a building which I know I can avoid to fall on somebody else, I try to choose it," he said. Robert is taking a social risk as much as a physical one, and people's attitudes toward him are similar to those of investors toward a start-up. They want in on his ventures when they succeed, but they are quick to naysay when he messes them up.

Climbers, especially, can be harsh in their assessments of Robert. To purists, free-soloing buildings is taboo, a transgression of the pastoral, solitary character that has traditionally defined their sport. On the readers' blog of the magazine *Alpinist*, I saw a post entitled "Thank God Alain Robert Didn't Wear Hand Jammies." It read:

> Holy fried house cat! Spiderman is at it again. . . . From the pictures, the climb looks pretty easy. I'm thinking about putting it on the Frank Giles Buildering Tour '08. . . . The Frank Giles Buildering Tour '07 saw such feats as me sitting on my couch with a Budweiser, slipping on the ice down the stairs from my deck . . . and climbing a ladder to get my cat, Choncy III, off the roof of my crappy one story house.

I called Christian Beckwith, the magazine's founder, who praised Robert's courage, if not his prowess—"The technical difficulty of what he does is not extraordinary," he said—but acknowledged an element of sacrilege in his "shtick." He said, "The climbers who garner the most respect in the sort of hard-core climbing community are the

MOTH

Matthew 6:19

Come bumble-footed ones,
dust squigglers, furry ripplers,

inchers and squirmers
humble in gray and brown,

find out our secret places,
devour our hearts,

measure us, geometer, with your curved teeth!
Leaves lick at the window, clouds

stream away,
yet we lie here,

perfect,
locked in our dark chambers

when we could rise in you
brief, splendid

twenty-plume, gold-
spotted ghost, pink scavenger,

luna whose pale-green wings
glow with moons and planets

at one with the burning world
whose one desire is to escape itself.

—*Katha Pollitt*

people who go out and are climbing for the love of it, and they pull off the bitchingest thing anybody's ever done, and they never say a *word* to anybody."

Other prominent climbers asserted that Robert was a member of the community in good standing. "Climbers tend to say, 'Oh, this is just bogus, it's like a stunt,' and what it is, of course, is pretty badass," Ivan Greene said. Alex Honnold: "I don't have anything particularly inspiring to say about Alain Robert. Except that he's totally badass." Matt Samet: "One word: badass."

February 17, 2009, 12:33 P.M. Robert kept climbing, past secretaries and janitors and credit-derivative executives. A skyscraper heaps hundreds of discrete worlds on top of one another. If you turned one on its side, it would be like a bazaar, a confederation of stalls. Separated from Robert by only a delicate membrane, people were blowing their noses and talking on phones. Once, climbing, he encountered a woman in a bathtub. Very occasionally, he will come face to face with someone upon whom his exertions seem to make no impression. Either the person is completely in a rush or he is completely bored. To Robert, he is a dead man. More often, people on the other side revel in noticing. They laugh, they wave, they take camera-phone pictures.

Every few stories, Robert stopped, crouched in a knee bend, and jiggled his arms to release the lactic acid. He chalked his hands and blew on them. He moved his feet in graceful tendus, as though he were dipping them in the surf to see if it was cold. Making one's way up an enormous sheet of glass can be disorienting—the building's plane seems to stretch skyward in a never-ending expanse. Robert knew the height of the Bank of China building, so he looked to it as a guidepost. According to his calculations, which were correct, he was past the midpoint of the climb.

At twelve-forty, he made a push. One, two, three, four, five, six floors. Even from an office on the twentieth or thirtieth floor, he appeared tiny. Only his orange pants were starting to be visible, the faraway base of a sawhorse. One of his feet slipped a little, but he recovered. Benjamin Ensminger-Law sent an e-mail to everyone he knew saying, "There is a guy climbing the Cheung Kong Building. I think it's that crazy French guy." The only response he got was from a friend, asking if he meant Sarkozy.

Five minutes later, Robert had fewer than twenty stories to go. He was up with the birds, and the helicopters, which seemed to him like background chatter in a restaurant. He stopped to rest on a ledge, for longer than usual. Ensminger-Law felt a vicarious panic.

The year before, Robert had climbed the north side of the Four Seasons Hotel in Hong Kong, starting from the sixth-floor spa, which he infiltrated by booking a Swedish massage. It was supposed to be an easy climb, a lark, but, near the top, the windows unexpectedly became taller, exceeding Robert's armspan. He was stuck. Trying to find a way out, he moved laterally, eventually reaching the intersection of the north and west faces of the building, which formed a corner known as a dihedral, or an open book.

In the corner, Robert splayed his legs to support himself between the two walls. The move, called a stem, or a bridge (it looks like one), is a resting position that takes the weight off the hands but increases the burden on the legs.

He moved tentatively out of the stem and turned his attention to a beam that formed the spine of the book. It was not an ideal escape route: it had a slippery texture, and presented, for fifteen feet, no possible footholds. He had chalked up over and over, blowing on his hands.

"He's going to die," a woman inside the building said.

Robert looked at her through the glass.

He considered how to stack his fingers, where his thumb should go. Fatigue was setting in. He thought it would be indecent to ask God to help him. Mentally, he repeated a mantra that he uses to counteract negative thinking: *"J'ai confiance en moi et je réussis tous ce que j'entreprends."*

At last, facing the window, Robert jammed his feet between the glass and the inner edge of the beam, shimmying up its spine, like a monkey on a coconut tree. Within seconds, he had made it to the roof, which housed a private swimming pool. The woman who thought he was going to die and her co-workers urged him to jump in.

Fifty floors up the side of the Cheung Kong, Robert was unhappy with his pacing. He felt slightly out of breath, but the situation was no more dire than that of any other man grappling with the depredations of age. Ensminger-Law, and the hundreds of other people watching, had no reason to worry. It turned out that Robert had stopped to talk on his cell phone. Three security guards appeared above him, peering over the railing of the roof, their heads silhouetted against the sky.

The skies were first scraped by the Pyramids. Towers, minarets, and obelisks followed—*axes mundi*, intended to link Earth and Heaven, the sea and the skies, the people with the gods. For most of human history, though, buildings of more than six stories were not common. In the late nineteenth century, the possibilities for high-rise construction were multiplied by two developments: the Bessemer process, and the elevator.

The first modern skyscraper was the Home Insurance Building, which was erected in Chicago in 1885. It was ten stories high, with a fireproof metal frame, and city officials were apparently so disbelieving of its viability that they briefly shut down its construction. (Some historians argue that, partly because the Home Insurance Building's construction included load-bearing masonry, the Equitable Life Assurance Building, in New York, was actually the first skyscraper.) By the turn of the century, skyscrapers had come to be seen not only as technological marvels but also as evidence of their proprietors' aspirations and self-image. Frank Woolworth paid for his Gothic offices on lower Broadway with thirteen and a half million dollars in cash. Metropolitan Life's headquarters, on Madison Square, were modelled on the Campanile in Venice's Piazza San Marco. The architects of the Chrysler Building, racing for supremacy against the Bank of the Manhattan Company, secretly fabricated their spire inside the building.

Once tall buildings ceased to be a novelty, landlords tended to seek the optimum height for financial return. Today, it is possible structurally to build a mile-high skyscraper, but buildings are thought to become riskier investments after about eighty floors: the cost of building doesn't redeem itself in rent. A superlatively tall building can be a draw in its own right. A "super-tall" building—defined as one taller than three hundred metres—increases the property value of its neighbors: not only does it offer great views; people want views of *it*. Upon its completion in September, the Burj Dubai will be the world's tallest building. Its height has not been publicly disclosed, so that no competitor can immediately trump it.

Skyscrapers are ever-regenerating Everests—human innovation and vanity insure that there is no final frontier. The fact that they were constructed to transcend human touch accounts for some of the appeal, for Robert, of getting his hands on them. "I have climbed the five tallest buildings in the world," he said. "Now there is this new one in Dubai. There is a kind of magic, for me, in doing these tall buildings." In January of 2000, Robert spent ten days in New York scouting the World Trade Center. He was coming home from the beach when a friend called to tell him that it had been destroyed. "For me, it was really something bizarre," Robert said. It was both a reprieve and a letdown, like a longtime nemesis dropping dead before a duel.

Robert's forays are not paramount among the considerations of engineers and architects. "Do we consider them? No," David Scott, a principal at Arup, a design and engineering firm, and the chairman of the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, said. "And should we consider them? No. We're not providing a climbing wall for prima-donna climbers to show off to the world and to be able to get fame and fortune and sell their stories to the newspaper." According to Scott, it would be virtually impossible to design an unclimbable building. "Even if you made the bottom thirty feet of sheer glass, a skilled climber could easily scale it with suction cups," he said. Robert used suction cups once, in Doha, but found them unsafe.

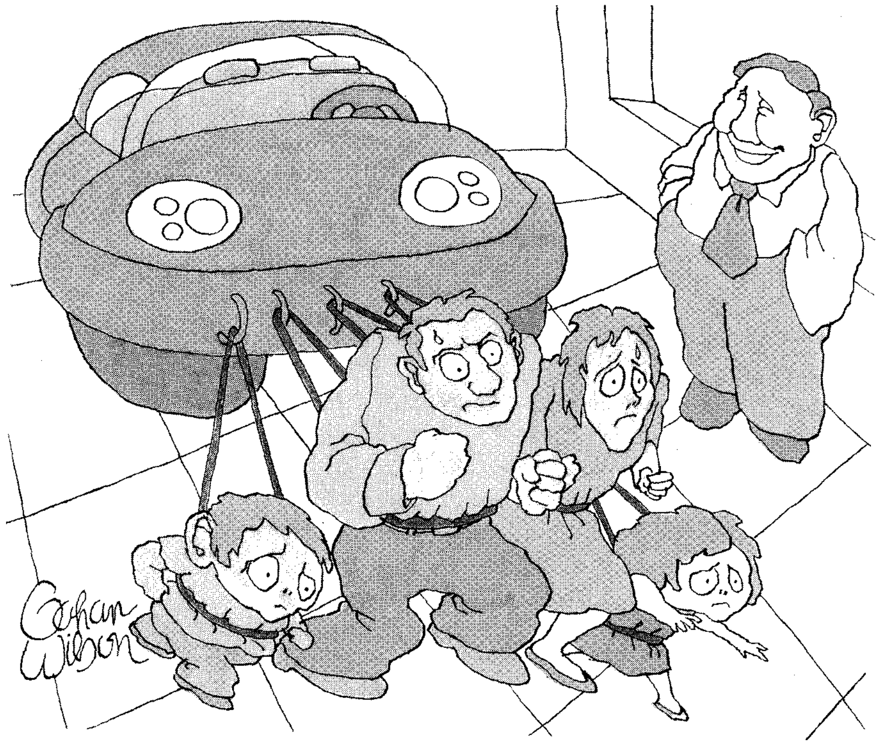
"You'll see, this is going to cause real trouble."

Robert has been seriously injured three times. The first accident, in January of 1982, occurred in Aix-en-Provence, when he rigged a rope through a nylon webbing anchor, instead of a carabiner, and the rope split as he was rappelling down a cliff. He broke a lot of bones and left the hospital in two casts. Six months later, he was free-soloing a cliff in Cornas when, he wrote, an instructor asked if he could help secure a rope for a pair of students. Robert climbed to the top of the cliff and descended on the rope, which had a bad knot. He plunged head first, landing on solid rock. He spent five days in a coma, and remained in the hospital for two months. It took him two years to retrain himself to walk sideways across a low brick wall outside his house. In 1993, he fell again, on the same cliff. The next year, feeling the need to prove himself, he free-soloed Pol Pot, a more than two-hundred-metre sheer rock face in the Verdon Gorge, on his second try, after nearly killing himself in front of his wife and sons.

Robert says that Pol Pot and the Sears Tower, that "she-devil," with "her dark skirts, her hunched shoulders," which he began climbing at 5:45 A.M. on August 20, 1999—he had timed it to the security guards' change of shift—were the tests of his life. On the Sears, everything was going well until, about twenty stories from the top, Robert felt one of his feet slip. On a cliff, moisture makes itself known: limestone turns brown, but the glass-and-steel surface of the Sears was invisibly lubricated by condensation from a host of gathering rain clouds. Robert rarely considers his mortality mid-climb—"You are so focussed, you are not even thinking about it"—but, this time, he worried that he would die. He knew that more climbers are killed on the way down than on the way up, and he decided that his only hope, however farfetched, was to try to fight his way to the top. He had been in binds before: on the GAN Tower, in Paris, he had got stuck in a flailing position known as a barn door; on the Golden Gate Bridge, he had felt like "a tiny fly struggling in the middle of this huge cobweb," and conquered the crux by doing a risky maneuver known as the Dülfer. (Later, when he was in jail, his fellow-inmates called him Little Schwarzenegger.) Robert compares the feeling of completing a challenging climb to sex. "This is something pleasurable," he said. "I can't tell you it's exactly the same as having an orgasm, but, O.K., I did some stuff that has put me so close to my limit, it's a bit similar to a climax."

Extreme athletes tend to be ascetics, but Robert's impulse seems to derive from a sort of hedonism. He has written, "Success matters, but so does the beauty of the gesture." He likes to nap. He likes women. Ivan Greene said, "I was very much under the impression, from the American climbers, that you've got to be serious, and it's about this specific diet, and he's busting out the chocolate cookies on the cliff and teaching me about the importance of good cheese." (Apparently, it is essential to virility.) More than most people, to make and to justify his decisions Robert invokes fun. "I am sure that I am having ten thousand times more fun than someone working as a cashier in the supermarket," he told me. Another time, he said, "Being an adult is maybe nice because you're having a car, but it's a bit boring. Where is the fun? I wanted to have fun. For me, that is my main priority." He told me that he is afraid of being bored. I asked what bored him. He said, "Like, sometimes when I have to go with Nicole to Ikea."

Money and fame can fuel fun, and Robert simultaneously admires and resents celebrity, especially when it accrues to those who do not have to put as much on the line to attain it as he does. At dinner, the night before the Cheung Kong climb, he launched into a tirade: "The girl from Big Brother France—she got fucked in a swimming pool. For what? She became famous based on what? Her I.Q. is like zero." Unusually, for someone who depends on his body for his livelihood, he treats it more like a night club than like a temple. The first evening we met, in Hong Kong, he ate French fries and spring rolls, and drank seven glasses of champagne. "Yours is China Bank, and mine is the Cheung Kong Center," he said, indicating my glass, which, for some reason, stood a few inches taller.



"Of course, the savings on gas are fantastic!"

• •

February 17, 2009, 12:50 P.M. Robert had called John Pickavant, who was stationed at a deli nearby. I can't look, Pickavant thought, he's hanging off the building with a bloody phone in his hand, and I'm staring at my bacon sandwich. Robert had about ten floors to go. He continued to take the work in methodical chunks. Right hand, left hand. Reach a ledge. Pause. Keep going.

Robert tacked to the right. Using cross-through maneuvers (the left hand moving over and across the right arm) and match moves (one hand next to the other), he progressed laterally toward the north side of the building, the one facing the water, the more picturesque. Ensminger-Law had no idea what was going on. The wind whipped Robert's hair and clothes as if they were pennants and he were a flagpole. During the phone call, he had asked if Pickavant thought that, at this point in the climb, he could cross over to the main face of the building without causing a traffic jam and getting in too much trouble.

Robert camped out on a ledge on the main face for minutes. He seemed to want to savor the last steps of the climb, to prolong them as much as possible. He was a barnacle on a vast piling. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you could easily miss him. To let his wife know that he would be O.K., he called her. When he was almost at the top of the building, he looked down at the cars.

Eventually, the security guards reappeared on the side of the roof above the main face. For thirty seconds, Robert climbed, until his outstretched fingertips tagged the top lip of the building. His forearms were abraded, from rubbing on the metal, and, on the middle finger of his left hand, a flap of skin had pulled back like the tab on a can. The outside of his right pinkie had three cuts. His head peeked over into the skyline—a minuscule bump. Robert pulled himself over the edge onto the roof of the building and, thrusting his hands above his head, fists clenched, stood straight up. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Video of Alain Robert.

THE NATURAL WORLD

SWAMP THINGS

Florida's uninvited predators.

BY BURKHARD BILGER

Just before daybreak, in the eerie hour after Hurricane Andrew struck southern Florida, a zoo worker named Ron Magill went to see what was left of his animals. He'd spent the night in his ranch house in suburban Miami, huddled in the master bedroom with his wife, who was nine months pregnant with their first child. They'd propped a mattress and an armoire against the sliding glass door, but could still feel it flexing beneath the bellowing wind. When the shutters flew off the windows, the pressure fell so suddenly that Magill's ears popped, as if he'd fallen from a great height. "I remember going outside afterward, and it was like 'The Wizard of Oz' in reverse," he says. "I went from the color of my living room to the black-and-white of devastation."

Across the street, a van had been flipped upside down and flung against a house; here and there trees were stuck in rooftops like toothpicks in canapés. Andrew was a Category 5 hurricane, small but tightly focussed, with winds of up to a hundred and seventy-five miles an hour. It made landfall near the city of Homestead on August 24, 1992, and cut a swath through some of the state's most populous areas. When it was over, twenty-five thousand homes had been destroyed and fifteen thousand boats lost, sixty-five people were dead and a hundred thousand permanently displaced. It was the costliest natural disaster in American history up to that time.

It was also a brief window on the ecology to come. As Magill was driving to the Miami Metrozoo, where he is the communications director, he passed a troop of rhesus macaques scampering up the road, as if on the plains of Kashmir. Later, the monkeys were spotted wandering through nearby farm fields, gorging themselves on tomatoes. Elsewhere, a small antelope was found wandering the halls of an administration building, a group of juvenile baboons broke into the weight room of a private home, and a python was found dead on the beach in Miami, with two full-grown raccoons in its belly. It was as if all Florida had turned, for a moment, into Disney's Animal Kingdom.

When Magill arrived at the zoo, it was in ruins. The monorail had been wrenched from its steel stanchions, its tracks twisted like a coat hanger. A six-horse trailer had been tossed over a ten-foot fence and into the rhino enclosure, and a new five-million-dollar aviary had blown away. "It was like God had come through with a twenty-five-mile-wide weed whacker and just levelled the place," he says. Miraculously, though, almost all the animals had survived: the zookeepers had herded them into a few bunkerlike buildings. The escapees that Magill had seen were mostly from private collections.

Florida is an "Ellis Island for exotic animals," Magill says. Some twelve thousand shipments of wildlife enter the country at the Port of Miami every year, second in number only to Los Angeles, and the state is home to thousands of pet stores, breeders, and animal-research facilities. "We're a biological cesspool of introduced life," another biologist told me. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission estimates that between three and four thousand primates escaped during the hurricane, together with as many as fifteen thousand other animals, including parrots, gazelles, wallabies, six mountain lions, and an Asian pheasant caught loping down the Florida Turnpike. The majority were rounded up or exterminated. (A rumor soon spread that the roving macaques, which were from a primate-research center, had been infected with AIDS. "It wasn't true," Magill says. "But pretty soon people were in the streets shooting them with shotguns. It was completely surreal.") What happened to the rest isn't clear.

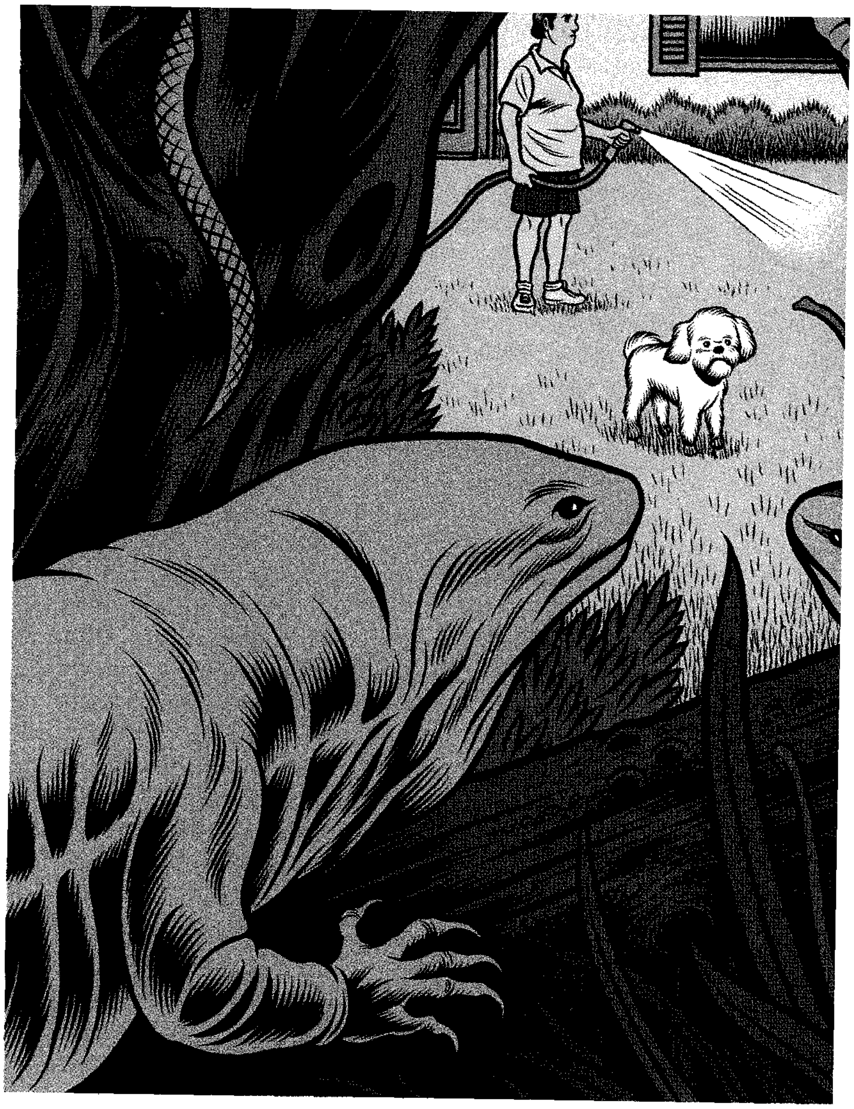
Only a few months earlier, for instance, a new warehouse for exotic reptiles had opened in Homestead. The owners couldn't afford to build a stormproof facility, so they'd rented an old greenhouse instead. "It was really makeshift," Patrick Reynolds, a lieutenant with Florida Fish and Wildlife, told me. "Everything was in Dixie cups and plastic dishes—stacks and stacks of them. The little ones were for frogs and scorpions and tarantulas. The larger ones were for snakes." Reynolds remembers seeing hundreds of Burmese pythons among the stock. They were just babies then, a few inches long, but would grow into some of the world's largest and deadliest reptiles. "And, well, Hurricane Andrew came through and the wind just took them, and—*whoooooo!*—off they went. There wasn't one stick of that greenhouse left."

Curled up in their flat plastic containers, those animals could have flown for miles—Frisbees, flung by the storm. Or so Reynolds and other wildlife managers speculate. Most of the animals would have died in flight, victims of what Reynolds calls "the blender effect." But a few may have survived long enough for a landing, in some saw-grass marsh or a cypress slough, and slithered off in search of food or a mate. The wind was blowing west that day, straight for the Everglades.

To a Burmese python, Florida offers more than freedom from a cage, more than a warm spot on a chilly continent. It offers virgin hunting grounds. The peninsula last began to emerge from the sea around a hundred and twenty-five thousand years ago, when the waters of the Caribbean, drained by glaciers to the north, gradually drew back to reveal a vast seabed, table flat beneath its scruff of vegetation. Much of the state is barely above sea level—one reason it's so vulnerable to hurricanes—and shrinking steadily. At the height of the last ice age, it was more than twice its current size. As one biologist put it, "Florida was underwater not too long ago and it will be again soon. Global warming is gonna fix this problem."

The peninsula is almost an island, in ecological terms: water on three sides, frost on the fourth. Its isolation has preserved an odd menagerie of prehistoric

CHARLES BURNS



The state's ecology is a kind of urban legend come true—the old alligator-flushed creatures—alligators and crocodiles, sawfish and sea turtles—but discouraged many immigrants. With no tropical neighbors to lend it species, Florida has been colonized mostly by northerners: red-tailed hawks, white-tailed deer, raccoons, and opossums. They've been joined by an abundance of birds and a handful of tropical castaways: frogs and snails rafted over from the Caribbean and South America, spiders ballooned in on storms. And yet, compared with most areas of similar warmth and fecundity, southern Florida has few native species. "Look at our lizards," Scott Hardin, the exotic-species coördinator for Florida Fish and Wildlife, told me. "We have sixteen. Cuba alone has eighty-three." To those lucky enough to find it, in other words, the state is less Ellis Island than Club Med: an exclusive seaside getaway, far from the fang and claw of the usual tropical crowd.

The Everglades have existed for only about five thousand years, and for most of that time they've been left to themselves. When people first arrived, near the end of the last ice age, Florida was a windswept savanna roamed by mammoths, sabre-toothed cats, and giant armadillos. As the climate turned wet and warm, the great beasts died off—what the heat didn't kill, the hunters did—and the prairie slowly rotted to marsh. It was a landscape unlike any other on the continent, a "soggy confusion" of land and water, as Michael Grunwald writes in his epic history, "The Swamp." Though it lacked the dizzying diversity of the Amazon, no other place had its mixture of tropical and temperate species—southern crocodiles next to northern alligators—and a few so odd they seemed to come from another planet: ghost orchids, pig frogs, strangler figs, and carnivorous plants.

The Spanish, beginning in 1513, planted their flag on the coast along with a few of their favorite crops: citrus trees and sugarcane, wheat and barley. But the Everglades still belonged to the natives. When Ponce de León tried to prove otherwise, they shot him with a poison arrow. The marsh was too wet for farming, too unpleasant for settling. One naturalist accused it of furnishing "as much laceration and as many annoyances to the square inch as any place I have ever seen." Another, Grunwald notes, caught a third of a million mosquitoes in a single trap in a single night. By 1897, when an explorer named Hugh Willoughby crossed the Everglades in a dugout canoe, most of North America had long since been tamed, but southern Florida, in Willoughby's words, was "as much unknown to the white man as the heart of Africa."

The colonists eventually carried the day, of course—with some help from the Corps of Engineers. Marshes were drained, canals dredged, bedrock ground into a mean soil. But it was only in the nineteen-sixties, after plants like hydrilla and water hyacinth, imported as ornamentals, had clogged up canals and irritated pleasure boaters, that people began to notice how thoroughly the landscape had changed. Where stands of coco plum and mahogany once stood, there were now thickets of Brazilian pepper, a relative of poison ivy. Where meadows of purple muhly grass grew, there were forests of Australian melaleuca, their blossoms as blandly scented as fresh-cut potatoes. After five centuries of turning pine groves to orange groves, Floridians had settled on an image of how nature should look. And these plants didn't belong.

The invasion, though, had just begun. Over the next fifty years, Florida's plant nurseries were joined by a thriving exotic-wildlife trade, sending a ragged parade of escapees into the wild: parakeets, peafowl, swamp eels, and giant ratlike capybaras. Troops of runaway squirrel monkeys were swinging from trees in Fort Lauderdale long before Hurricane Andrew, and spiny-tailed iguanas were lounging on branches in Boca Grande. Pet stores made a habit of bringing in new exotics every year. Iguanas were in fashion for a while, then marmosets and poison-arrow frogs. "In the eighties, everyone wanted furry animals," Patrick Reynolds recalls. "Cougars and lions and tigers. Those were the cocaine-cowboy days. Then, in the early nineties, the reptile explosion started."

Florida now has more exotic lizard species than there are natives in the entire Southeast. On a single tree you could conceivably find plants and animals from six continents, including parrots from South America, mynah birds and Old World climbing ferns from Asia, vervet monkeys from Africa, ladybird beetles from Australia, and feral cats from Europe, via Africa and Asia. In some cases, the recent immigrants would be more genetically diverse than their cousins back home. The state's ecology is a kind of urban legend come true—the old alligator-flushed-down-the-toilet story repeated a thousand times with a thousand species.

Some find all this thrilling: Florida has become an open-air zoo, richer in species than ever before. To others, it's the harbinger of a new and depressingly undifferentiated age, when the old biological borders begin to fade and every place starts to look like every other. Ecologists have even given it a name: the Homogecene.

When Burmese pythons began to appear in the Everglades, in 1995, the state wildlife authorities didn't give them much thought. Snakes like these had turned up before. Burmese pythons were among the most popular exotics in pet stores at the time. They were cheap—twenty to thirty dollars a snake—easy to feed, and less temperamental than boas. The hatchlings looked harmless lying on a heat rock in a terrarium, and the store owners were happy not to correct that impression. "I remember thinking, Is everybody buying these things?" Reynolds says. "Well, apparently so. The craze was on. We were pulling twenty-foot pythons out from under little houses in Coconut Grove. Nobody cared. They didn't have a chance to breed that we knew about."

The escapees were usually caught in the suburbs or near the edges of the park, and were almost always full grown. Invariably, they'd come from a pet shop or a breeder, or been set free by an owner who found himself with more snake than he could handle. As Skip Snow, a wildlife biologist at Everglades National Park and its chief python hunter, later put it in a PowerPoint presentation, "Do you really want a snake that may grow more than twenty feet long, weigh two hundred pounds, urinate and defecate like a horse, live more than twenty-five years, and for whom you will have to provide mice, rats, and eventually rabbits?"

Still, the pythons found in the mid-

NEWFANE

1.
How we loved to create a world.

Out of *gray* we made the pin-oak leaves
with their saw teeth and odd waxy sheen,
dry and matte to the touch, out of *granite*
we made the marriage house, and always
we added a flaw that we called *fire*
or *time* or *the stranger.*

2.
A drop of water on the lip of a jug,
trembling, trying to hold on
for another second to the idea of sphericity—
that was us, our nakedness.

3.
We worked to thwart our happiness
because it was so unexpected;
suffering tasted like our mouths.

4.
We had a flagstone path, a pond, four birches,
a dog racing in tight circles, helpless
against the dream of fresh snow.

In the future, that red Schwinn with training wheels
must find a way to pedal itself.

5.
World like a child who learned to walk
beyond our outstretched hands.

—*D. Nurkse*

nineties didn't fit the usual pattern. They ranged in size from juveniles to adults, and they were all caught deep in the park, in the saline glades to the southeast. Why would anyone drive that far just to dump some snakes?

Snow isn't sure how the pythons got to the Everglades. But he, for one, doesn't buy the Frisbee theory. Assuming the snakes survived the hurricane's blender effect, why didn't a few of them land closer to the reptile warehouse in Homestead? The mystery deepened when no more snakes were found for a while. Another pair showed up in 2000, and three more the following year. But there never seemed to be enough to prompt an official response. Snow was a "backcountry specialist" at the time, marking trails and scouting the wilder reaches of the park. He was concerned about the pythons, he says, but he had a hard time interesting others in them. "People kept saying, 'You haven't found a nest. You haven't seen very many.' There was a lot of denial, in my opinion." Burmese pythons had rarely been studied in their native habitat, and it wasn't clear that they could survive in the Everglades. "So people just made stuff up," Snow says. " 'The cold weather will kill them.' 'Fire ants will eat their eggs.' If they could find an excuse, they'd make an excuse."

The situation wasn't unique to the Everglades. After more than half a century of studying invasive species, biologists still can't tell which ones will die off and which ones will run rampant. Some, like the English house sparrows imported to New York City in the eighteen-fifties, start multiplying soon after they arrive. Others lie low for decades. "Reptiles have a tremendous amount of patience," Snow says. "They can wait out harsh environmental conditions. They can go without eating for a long time. Then, all of a sudden, there's a phase shift, a trigger point. The population starts to function as a population rather than as a lone inoculation." In a place as remote as the Everglades, he adds, that moment is almost impossible to predict. "When do you draw the line? When do you take action to avoid that logarithmic point where things take off exponentially?"

The decision, in the end, was made for him. One January morning in 2003, a group of tourists were walking along the Anhinga Trail, not far from the park's main entrance, when they noticed something splashing in the shallows nearby. When they went to take a closer look, they were witness to a death match. A full-grown alligator had clamped its teeth on an adult python and was ensnared in the snake's coils. The fight went on for more than twenty-four hours, with the alligator, by all accounts, getting the better of it. By the time it loosed its jaws and the mangled snake slithered away, thousands of pictures and hours of videotape had been taken, and accounts later appeared in outlets as disparate as the *National Examiner* ("GATOR VS. PYTHON!") and *National Geographic.* "The park superintendent called me after that," Snow recalls. "He said, 'We've got a problem.' "

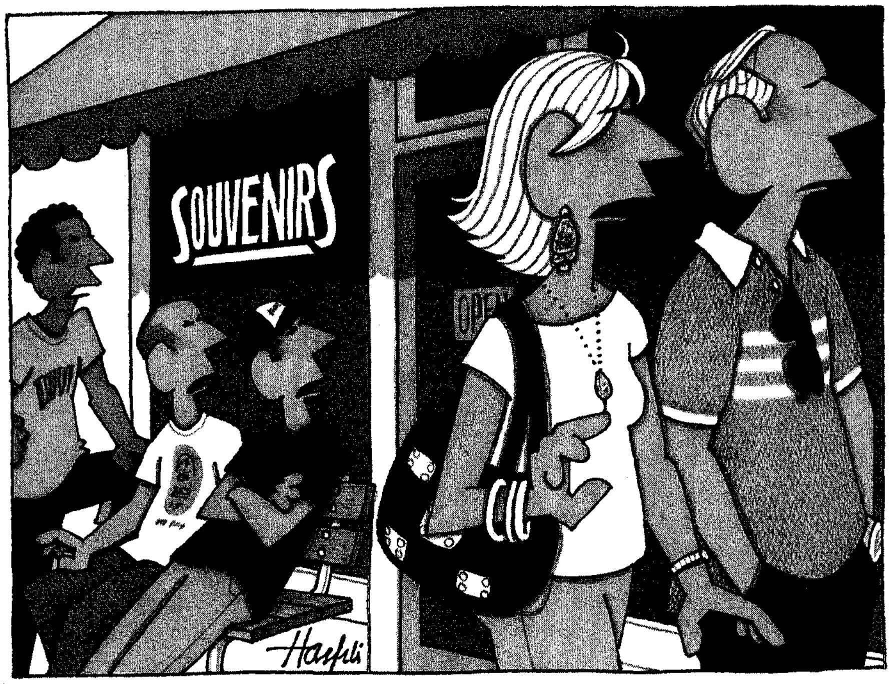
Within months, Snow was finding pythons of all sizes in the park, including hatchlings—proof, if any more were needed, that the snakes were breeding. That summer, he took one of the hatchlings to a meeting of the state's wildlife managers. "Here it is 2003, and we've spent all these years waiting for the standard of guilt to be met," he says. "So I show up with this little python and pass it around." The others took one look at it, he says, and told him that he was out of luck—Burmese pythons were in Florida for good. "In one week, we'd gone from 'No problem at all' to 'You might as well give up.' "

Snow, who is fifty-seven, has the dour, keen-eyed look of a large waterbird—natural enemy of snakes. His face is thin and angular, its balding dome crowned by gray bristles. He has long legs, sloping shoulders, and a craning neck. When folded up behind the wheel of a car, as he often is, on his python-hunting trips, he can never seem to get comfortable, bobbling up and down and bending at the waist, squinching his eyes and jerking his head to the side. Yet he keeps his truck at a maddeningly slow pace, eyes fixed on the shoulders of the road.

"I won't pass up a snake," he told me as we were driving through the park one afternoon. "I may not be looking with every ounce of my body every minute. But there are search images that get developed: the feel, the look, the body posture, and head shape—all these things together." The day before, as we were leaving the park, Snow had suddenly swerved his truck around and doubled back down the road. He'd seen a black shape winding across the asphalt, he explained, but by the time he stepped out to catch it, it was gone. "Probably just a water moccasin," he said—poisonous, but only a fraction of a python's size.

Snow has spent his entire career with the park service. After earning a master's degree in environmental sciences from Miami University in Ohio, he took positions at Mt. Rainier and at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, in North Dakota. The Dakotas were pristine and starkly beautiful: canyons of striated sandstone, patrolled by golden eagles and pronghorn antelope. In the spring, lightning would sometimes ignite the coal deposits underground, firing the clay above them into brick-red porcelainite. Snow and his wife, whom he'd met while still in high school in Cleveland, spent eight winters in the park and had a boy and a girl. But the cold and isolation could be hard to bear. The closest big city was Bismarck, three hours away; the closest thing to a social life shooting hoops with the two other park-service employees in the district. In 1988, Snow applied for a post in the Everglades, hoping to find a warmer, more stimulating habitat for his family. Chasing giant snakes wasn't really what he had in mind.

He lives in Miami now and commutes to the Daniel Beard Center, in Everglades National Park. The research center sits in what's known as the Hole-in-the-Donut, an area at the heart of the park that was long ago cleared for farming and the military. From Snow's office, in what was once an Army barracks, he can see a pair of low bunkers built to house Nike missiles after the Cuban missile crisis. But the Burmese python has come to seem a far more immediate threat. Snow and his colleagues have found more than nine hundred so far—three hundred and eleven in the past year alone. At best, he estimates, they represent ten to fifteen per cent of the total population; at worst, fewer than one per cent. The Everglades, at full capacity, could hold as many as a hundred and forty thousand pythons.



"Next year, let's go someplace where the locals resent the tourists in a language we don't understand."

"There was that movie 'Gremlins,' " he said as we were driving. "They had these cute little things that, if they got out, they got out of control. Well, some wildlife is like that. These things get *huge*."

In the summer, pythons come out at night to hunt. In the winter, they emerge during the day, to bask in the brief sun. It was December now. The light was fading early, and the marsh was already alive with creaking and buzzing, flapping and cawing. On either side of the road, stands of slash pine sent shadows across the road, spindly as flamingo legs. In the distance, a string of low, bushy islands hung between marsh and sky—faint pulses on the horizon's flat line. The Everglades are a river of grass more than fifty miles wide and a hundred miles long—a landscape so innocent of topography that its mountains are measured in inches and even the largest predators try to keep a low profile. Burmese pythons are semi-aquatic: they're happy to hunt or swim in salt water or sweet, but they have to sleep and lay their eggs on dry ground. In the Everglades, they prowl from island to island, nesting in sandy soil or crawling onto patches of cattails. "They don't need much—any little island will do," Snow said. A snake may stay there for a few days, brooding or digesting in some comfortable hole, well sheltered from the wind, then head into the marsh again for another meal.

Snow has learned these habits largely through radio tracking. In the past three years, he has implanted twenty-five pythons with Tootsie Roll-shaped transmitters and tracked their movements across the marsh. His equipment can be accurate to within a couple of inches, and he has followed the snakes by airboat, motorboat, helicopter, canoe, truck, and on foot. Yet they still slip from his grasp. More than once, he has stood knee-deep in the muck, a beeping radio tracker in hand, convinced that a snake is at his feet. But he can't see it. Its movements are too silky, its olive-brown skin too well steeped in the murky water. "You know that the snake is right there," he said. "It makes no sound, doesn't rustle. Then all of a sudden it's over there."

To go any great distance, an animal usually has to cross a road. When it crosses a road, it runs the risk of getting spotted or squished. (Some biologists call this the "rapid-acceleration removal method.") Snow's best strategy, therefore, is to wait for the snakes to come to him. An enterprising python may travel more than a mile in a day, his tracking has shown, so sightings are not uncommon. Earlier that day, he had found a dead juvenile along the main park road, its skin ground into the gravel and shredded by a tire. The week before, he and another park employee had caught a live fourteen-footer. They'd grabbed it by its tail and yanked it onto the asphalt, pinned its head with a snake stick—a metal pole with a retractable noose at its tip—and wrestled it into an ice chest, for later dissection.

Pythons aren't venomous, but their upper jaws are fitted with a quadruple row of sharp, inward-curving teeth, their lower jaws with a double row. They use the teeth to gain purchase on their prey until they can coil their body around it. Snow's advice is simple: "Stay away from the pointy end." Even a small snake can cause a sizable wound and squeeze your arm hard enough to cut off the blood flow. The large ones have been known to swallow leopards whole. "It's just an absolutely absurd animal to have to deal with," he said. "The fact that they're even here. The fact that we even have to have this conversation. It's just off-the-charts crazy."

Scientists who study invasive species tend not to talk like scientists. They talk like detectives on a homicide squad, or generals in a Japanese monster movie. They count deaths, predict extinctions, warn of alien takeovers. They're used to being ignored.

Since 1900, the federal government has kept lists of injurious species that are forbidden from entering the country. They include disease carriers like Indian wild dogs and flying foxes, well-known invasives such as zebra mussels and brown tree snakes, and noxious weeds such as devil's thorn, goat's-rue, and giant hogweed. But adding a species to the list can take as long as a decade—the Fish and Wildlife Service has a single person assigned to the task—and enforcement is a constant struggle.

Every year, more than a third of a billion exotic plants enter the Port of Miami, along with its twelve thousand shipments of exotic wildlife. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service can afford to inspect only one in ten to twenty shipments—the ones that seem most suspect. "Even if we think we're catching a lot of people, it's probably only twenty-five per cent," Eddie McKissick, the service's lead agent at the port, told me. "It's like anything else—you catch them, they change their ways." Profits from international wildlife smuggling, the Department of Justice has estimated, are second only to those from drug smuggling.

McKissick is fifty-one and still enjoys the chase. He drives a black Crown Victoria Interceptor ("This sucker will scat!"), keeps his hair close-cropped and his mustache trim, and reads game-warden memoirs in his spare time: "A Sword for Mother Nature," "The Thin Green Line." When his cell phone rings, it sounds like a cavalry charge: Baba *ba* baba *baaaa!*

After sixteen years at the port, McKissick has seen or heard of every sort of smuggler's trick: boxes with false bottoms, bags with hidden compartments, boots made from endangered species and re-covered in common leather. One man was caught with a boa constrictor wrapped around his belly; another had a pair of pygmy marmosets in his fanny pack; yet another tried to sneak in some live finches—he'd crammed the birds into pill bottles and strapped them around his legs. The bond room below McKissick's office is piled to the ceiling with confiscated corpses: stuffed cobras, dried sea horses, monkey skulls, a rhinoceros head. But live exotics still fetch the best price. A few years ago, inspectors caught a smuggler with a suitcase full of giant bird-eating tarantulas and other exotics from Venezuela. The man had bought the lot for three hundred and fifty dollars, but he could have sold them in the United States for forty-five thousand.

By now, so many exotics have made it to Florida and borne young that local breeders may soon export as many animals as are brought in. When McKissick and I arrived at the port one Monday morning, a shipment of reptiles was headed for South Korea. They were packed in Styrofoam boxes and piled on a pallet in an Air Canada loading bay. McKissick watched as two of his staff, wearing gloves and safety glasses, sliced open the boxes with a razor. When the lids came off, hundreds of hatchlings blinked up at the light. They were crouched in round containers perforated with breathing holes, stacked on top of one another in a reptilian high-rise: snapping turtles with fierce little eyes, flying geckos with suction-cup feet, black-throated monitors flexing their slender, articulate claws. One two-litre soda bottle was filled with bright-green tree frogs, careening off the sides like popcorn at a movie theatre. It was an ecosystem in miniature.

Compared with most, this was a model shipment. "The crates that come in from the Third World—you can literally tear them apart with your hands," one of the inspectors told me. Many of the animals die in transit, she added, and some of the rest get free in the boxes and are desperate for release. The week before, a shipment had come in from Asia with more than seven hundred animals, including taipans, death adders, and eight other species of venomous snakes. Taipans are among the world's deadliest reptiles—their bite can be fifty times more toxic than a rattlesnake's—yet they've never made it onto the government's injurious list. With the right permit, an importer in Florida can sell as many as he likes. None are known to have escaped into the wild so far, but there have been numerous reports of cobras on the loose, as well as anacondas.

McKissick admits to being fond of some exotics—he likes to throw a little fruit to the green iguanas that hang out in his back yard. As for troublemakers like the python, he said, there's no good way to keep them out of the country. The best you can do is try to exterminate them when they escape. It was an odd admission for someone in his position, but I'd heard similar sentiments from a number of biologists. "It's time to stop studying these things," one of them told me, "and time to start killing them."

Late one afternoon, in a large enclosure behind the research center in the Everglades, Skip Snow and I watched a python go hunting. The snake had been caught a few weeks earlier, on the Tamiami Trail, to the northeast, and implanted with a radio transmitter—the first of three snakes that Snow hoped to track and study more closely in the enclosure. She was a magnificent animal: thirteen feet long and more than seventy pounds. As she moved across the open ground, her body morphed and flowed like melted wax, pooling into thick coils, then thinning into a narrow strand, sinking into the dun-colored grass, then suddenly floating above it, tasting the air with her flickering tongue.

Pythons are carnivorous, but they aren't picky. Snow and others have found mice, rats, rabbits, muskrats, raccoons, squirrels, bobcats, opossums, otters, deer, ducks, coots, grebes, egrets, and a house cat named Frances in the stomachs of snakes. "I don't think there is anything they can't eat or attempt to eat," he told me. The smaller prey go down in one gulp; the larger ones get a bite and a patient squeeze. But some meals are more obliging than others. Pythons often have teeth torn loose during a struggle and end up ingesting them, and they have trouble swallowing pointy objects: porcupines, for instance, or racks of antlers. One python in the Everglades was found with a great blue heron stuck in its throat. The bird's bill had poked its way through the back of the snake's head, and was widening the hole every time the snake tried to swallow it. When the python was on the verge of getting caught, it disgorged the bird and slithered off—presumably to hunt another day.

"You never bet against a snake," Snow said. "But they do make mistakes." Four years ago, a thirteen-foot python managed to swallow a six-foot alligator. By the time Snow found them, after a helicopter pilot had spotted them at Shark River Slough in the eastern Everglades, the snake was suffering from extreme indigestion. Its belly had burst open and the alligator's hind legs were protruding out of it like a pair of vestigial limbs. Some biologists speculated that the victim woke up inside the snake and tried to kick itself free, or clawed through in its death throes. Snow thought the python's appetite was just too large for its stomach. "That snake made a mistake," he said.

The question of diet had been much on Snow's mind lately. He and his colleagues had caught pythons on bridges and on boardwalks, along roadways and along the edges of canals. They'd found one snake inside a tourist's Ford Explorer, so tightly coiled inside a wheel well that they tried to shock it loose with a Taser. ("This tactic proved unsuccessful," the park ranger's report later noted, "as the python began to contract and excrete body fluids all over the four responders.") But they'd caught only a handful of pythons in the swamp, and they'd never managed to trap one. To lure a snake, he says, you have to have something it really wants. How can you catch an animal that eats everything?

Snow's latest answer lay along the fence, not far from the python we were watching. It was a rectangular wire trap, with openings at either end. It was positioned to intercept snakes that were following the fence line. To enter it, they would have to crawl down a funnel-like passage and squeeze past a hinged flap. But Snow had doubts about the design. The pythons in the park had shown no interest in it so far—the traps we'd checked earlier that day, near an abandoned lodge in the marsh, were all empty. Why bother crawling through a trap when you could just go around it?

Various state and federal agencies were working on more promising alternatives: traps baited with snake pheromones, thermal cameras that could track a python's body heat, "Judas snakes" radio-tagged to lead hunters to nests. A beagle named Python Pete had even been trained to track snake skins around the research center, with mixed results. ("He still needs to go to finishing school," Snow said.) But the new schemes all required more research and funding, and invasive animals are still a low priority in Florida. The state budget for controlling invasive plants, which threaten Florida's boating and farming industries, is nearly forty million dollars a year. The budget for invasive animals is less than a million.

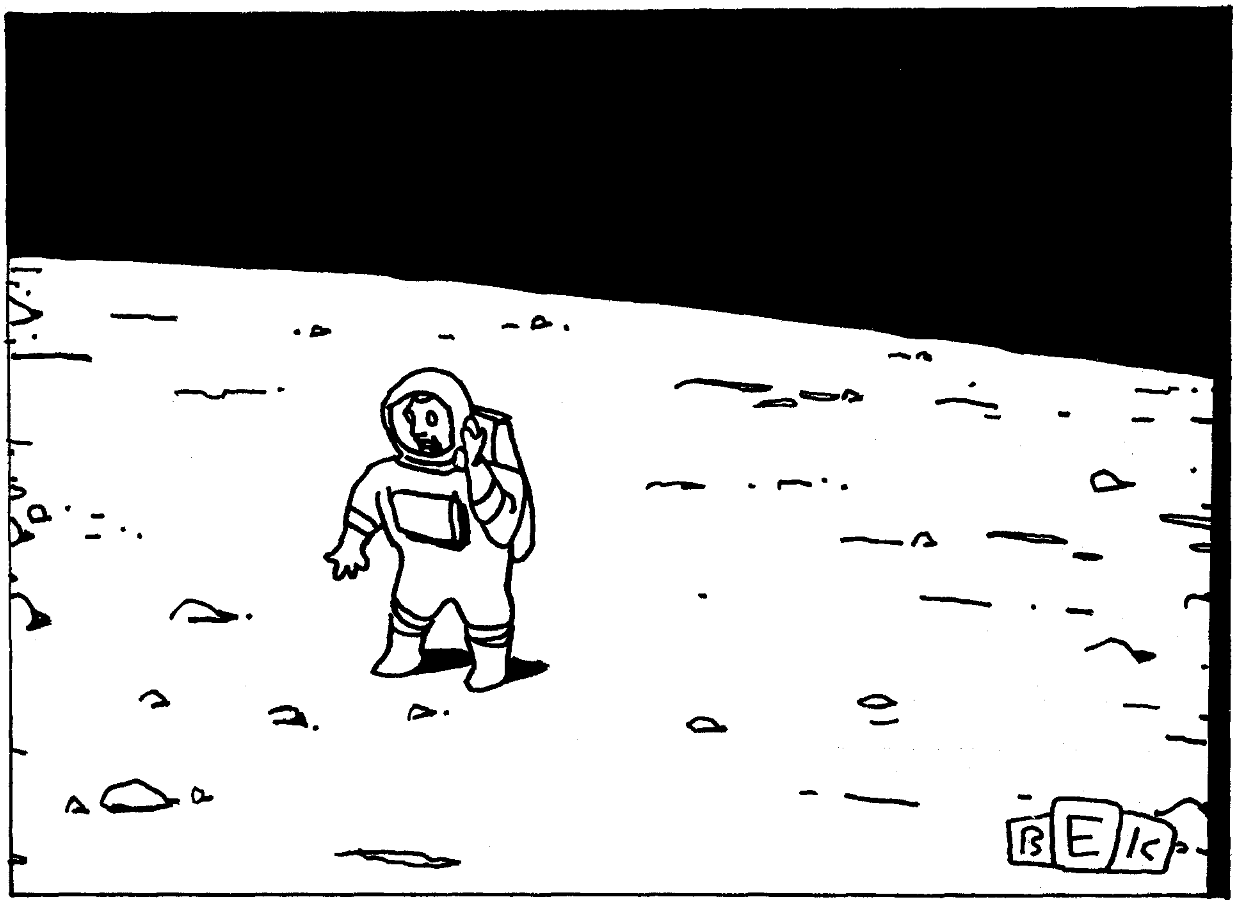
Inside the preserve, the python had reached the trap and was nudging it with her nose. Instead of crawling inside, though, she slid over to the fence. She found the gap between it and the outside of the trap, wriggled her head into it, and pulsed her body forward, like a drawstring slipping through a hem. Then she lay there, comfortably cradled, and basked in the day's last light, as if she had all the time in the world.

Burmese pythons have been found as far north as Jacksonville and as far west as Tallahassee. Those snakes were no doubt escapees, but it's clear that the wild python population is spreading. The only question is how far. Animals pay no regard to political borders, biologists like to point out, and Burmese pythons are better travelled than most. Their native range stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas to the jungles of Indonesia, with everything from prairies to pine forests in between. And although they're cold-blooded, they're expert at regulating their body temperature. In the summer, they can climb a shady tree or cool off in a lake (their tails are prehensile, their lungs strong enough to sustain them underwater for half an hour or longer). In the winter, they can coil up in a riverbank or a hollow tree and brumate—the reptilian version of hibernating.

Two years ago, Gordon Rodda, a zoologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, decided to map the python's potential range in the United States. Together with two colleagues, he gathered temperature and rainfall data from weather stations throughout the python's native range, then compared them with similar data from the United States. The results were unsettling. "We had the same feeling that other people have, that this is a tropical animal," Rodda told me. "But once we actually looked at the weather records we were like, 'Huh. They aren't as tropical as we thought.' " Roughly a third of the contiguous United States lies within the python's range, they concluded, including all the Southern states and large portions of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. By 2100, at the current rate of global warming, the pythons could reach New York City.

Rodda's scenario is in some dispute. Last August, a team of biologists from the City University of New York, using a different habitat model, predicted that the snakes would stay safely contained in southern Florida. Still, Snow expects the worst. "I see no reason why all of Florida can't be occupied," he told me one morning as he was getting ready to dissect a python in his lab. "And they should be able to make a go of it in the southern tier of the U.S." Pythons can travel long distances, he said, and cross large bodies of open water. "They're very good swimmers. It's nothing to think of an animal going five or six miles or more." A python that finds itself in an unpleasant spot can always slither on.

The snake that Snow was dissecting had been caught in Summerland Key, one of the southernmost of the Florida Keys. To get there, it could have crawled down Highway 1, crossing several bridges along the way, or swum from key to key. Or it



"It's fine—you know, it's a moon."

• •

might have escaped or been set free by a local resident. The islands were a bad place for pythons to be. They were home to a number of endangered species well suited to the snake's appetites: Key Largo cotton mice, Lower Keys marsh rabbits, and others. (Florida as a whole has thirty-one threatened or endangered species that are vulnerable to pythons, and another forty-one that are listed as rare.) Several snakes have been caught on the islands with wild animals in their bellies, and python hatchlings have been found on the mainland, just north of Key Largo.

Snow unspooled the snake onto the floor and measured it: eleven feet two inches. Then he lifted it onto the counter, stuck a scalpel in it, and unzipped it like a ski bag. "If the smell starts to bother you, we can open the back door," he said. "I'm kind of numb to it." He checked the body for giant-toad ticks—another exotic species, carried in on cane toads from the Caribbean—and peeled back its tapestry skin. As he worked, he hummed a tune under his breath: "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face."

In the fall, pythons usually fatten themselves up for the winter, Snow said, but this snake had been badly injured, probably by a car. Its tail was lacerated, some of its ribs were broken, and it weighed only twenty-two pounds. He pointed to its pale-pink flesh, its moss-green gallbladder. "I'm seeing virtually no abdominal fat," he said. "This thing was running on empty."

You can learn a lot about an animal from its gut—that Burmese pythons don't much care for fish, for instance. But Snow's purpose, in this case, was mostly political. If he could prove that the pythons were eating endangered species, it would be much easier to lobby for funds. So far, he'd pulled a few Key Largo wood rats out of snakes, but he could use more charismatic victims. "Not all wildlife is created equal," he said, extracting a brown wad of what looked like rodent fur from the snake's intestine. "We did get a wood stork once. And a Florida panther would be right up there—almost as good as a human. But nothing would be as good as the lap dog of a county commissioner."

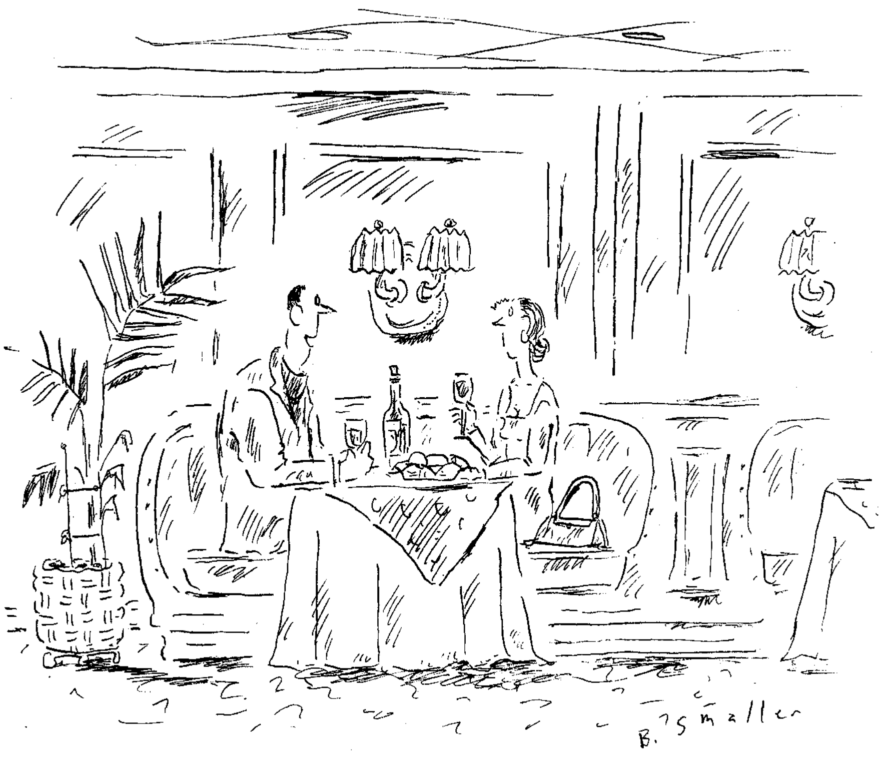
The biologists I spoke to seemed a little surprised at the lack of human fatalities thus far. "If a thirteen-footer can consume a six-foot alligator, it's only a matter of time," Kenneth Krysko, at the Florida Museum of Natural History, told me. "Come on! Kids aren't six feet tall." A child in a secluded park, or along a canal, would be easiest to snatch. But Snow can imagine other scenarios. More and more pythons are being found around rural homes, he said—"The typical story is 'Yeah, you know, my chickens have been missing for weeks' "—and elsewhere they've been known to throttle the occasional pet owner. Pythons seem to have a tremendous homing instinct, he added. Six of the snakes that he has radio-tracked have crawled straight back to the places where they were caught—a journey, in one case, of more than forty-eight miles.

"It puts an interesting twist on things," he said. "If you're an owner and let a python loose, what are the odds that it will show up at your back door?"

Floridians have some experience with man-eating beasts. Nearly a million and a half native alligators still roam the state—five times as many as thirty years ago, when they were declared endangered—and fatal attacks have tripled in the past decade. (Imagine a million and a half wolves stalking the forests of Wisconsin, a million and a half mountain lions roaming Colorado.) The state's "nuisance alligator" hot line—1-866-FWC-GATOR—gets more than sixteen thousand calls a year, and tales of close scrapes and pet abductions are a staple of the local news: the cocker spaniel snapped up while cavorting beside a pond, the jogger dragged off a canal embankment, the local pastor yanked underwater while out for a swim. "Most of the time, gators won't attack," Allan Woodward, a biologist with Florida Fish and Wildlife, assured me. "It's just that, every once in a while, they decide to think of humans as prey and give it a try."

The Burmese python can seem, under the circumstances, like just another local attraction. Americans are schizophrenic when it comes to invasives, Snow says. Every year, we spend well over a hundred billion dollars combatting them—about a quarter of our gross national agricultural product is lost to foreign pests and weeds—and tens of billions importing and selling exotic plants and pets. Florida alone averages one new agricultural pest a month. "We are in a situation now where everything that is imported is largely considered innocent until proven guilty," Snow said. "But the standard of guilt is too high." Even if the state can scrape together the money and the know-how for a python-eradication campaign, he said, it may not succeed. A single female python could lay up to a hundred eggs in a clutch, repopulating the state in a matter of years.

Since 1993, a coalition of scientists and environmentalists has urged the federal government to ramp up its efforts against invasives. ("I've dragged snake skins through the halls of Congress," Snow says.) The campaign culminated, last spring, in the proposal of the Nonnative Wildlife Invasion Prevention Act. The act would turn exotic-import laws inside out. Instead of a blacklist of banned species, it would give agents like Eddie McKissick a white list of approved species, screened by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Any animal not on the list couldn't enter the country. The bill was introduced to Congress by Madeleine Bordallo, a representative from Guam, where brown tree snakes have eaten all but a few of the native songbirds, and was modelled on similar measures in Australia and New Zealand. If it passes, it should reduce exotic imports, simplify inspections, and help prevent future invasions.



"I'm not sure about children, but I've always wanted progeny."

But it won't pass. The pet trade is worth more than forty billion dollars a year in the United States and nearly a hundred million Americans own exotics. (When I mentioned the white list idea to Eddie McKissick, he burst out laughing.) In 1976, the industry blocked a similar measure using the same arguments it uses now. The act would be a "managerial nightmare," Marshall Meyers, the chief executive officer and general counsel of the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, told a House subcommittee last June. More than ten thousand species would have to be screened, many of them barely known to science. If biologists still can't say whether pythons will stay in Florida or crawl to Brooklyn, how can they predict if any species will become invasive? "Simply on the grounds of Statistics 101, this is unworkable," Meyers said. "Absent a crystal ball, it is impossible to prove conclusively that no harm has ever nor will ever occur at any time, anywhere in the United States."

The one statistic that seems to hold true is the rule of ten, described by an English biologist in 1993: one in ten exotics escape into the wild; one in ten of those become established; one in ten established exotics become pests. The rest tend to stay in their cages or cling to their ecological niches. (Or, if we're very lucky, eat one another: Argentine fire ants, marching north from Alabama, have feasted on Japanese beetles, marching south.) Invasives can undoubtedly drive natives to extinction, as the brown tree snake has shown. But most of the time an ecosystem isn't a game of musical chairs. When a new species arrives, it rarely takes another's place. It just finds another spot to sit.

Paul Shafland, the director of Florida Fish and Wildlife's Non-Native Fish Laboratory, has been tracking local fish populations for more than three decades. Florida's waterways are home to more than thirty species of exotic freshwater fish, he told me, and their total biomass nearly tripled between 1980 and 2007. Yet the number of native fish hasn't changed in that period; nor have any natives gone extinct. In 1984, Shafland spearheaded the introduction of the South American butterfly peacock bass to Florida, arguing that it would both control invasive tilapia and make a superb sport fish. Florida anglers now spend nearly ten million dollars a year trying to catch it, giving a substantial boost to the local economy. "Nothing has been displaced," Shafland said. "We're just changing the carrying capacity."

Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing is more of a philosophical question than an ecological one. Shafland, like most fisheries biologists, is used to managing animals for the enjoyment of people. "I'm a consumptive-use conservationist, not a puristic preservationist," he says. Yet he, too, regrets the changes in Florida. Even a single invasive—the one in a thousand—can transform a landscape, turning a prairie into a forest, a bird sanctuary into a snake pit. And the rest can slowly change the way we see a place. A parrot in Miami is like a McDonald's in Kathmandu: a sign that you are everywhere and nowhere at once. I asked Shafland the same question I had asked every biologist I'd interviewed: Would you turn back the ecological clock if you could? Like the rest, he didn't hesitate: "If I had a button on my desk today, and it said that I could eliminate every exotic freshwater fish in Florida, I would push it instantly."

"We are engaged in a giant experiment that no one can control," Snow told me, on my last night in the Everglades. "We are throwing these things in with no idea, no thought, no design. The only thing that continues to save us—or, at least, to slow things down—is the rule of ten." Some exotics may not be able to survive the local winter, but anacondas would be "very comfortable" in the Everglades, Snow believes, and it's hard not to wonder what other rough beasts are slouching toward Florida. "Let's not let this happen again," he said. "I don't want it to happen again."

As I was driving back to the airport from the Gulf Coast, two days later, I stopped in a town called Cape Coral, just west of Fort Myers. Carved from more than a hundred square miles of mangroves and piney flatwoods, Cape Coral has grown into a Florida boomtown like any other: it looks as if it were built, badly, last week. Its streets are a labyrinth of subdevelopments and strip malls, interlaced with more than four hundred miles of canals. When it was developed in the late nineteen-fifties, by the Rosen brothers from Baltimore, they promised prospective buyers a "waterfront wonderland." But the canals haven't just given people access to the swamp. They've given the swamp access to people.

Among the creatures that have lurched into town in recent years is an African lizard called the Nile monitor. Like pythons, monitors were quite popular in the pet trade during the early nineties: Patrick Reynolds remembers seeing hundreds of hatchlings in the reptile warehouse in Homestead. And, like pythons, they are spectacular animals that make terrible pets. Up to seven feet long, with stout legs, tapered jaws, and skin that seems to be encrusted with semiprecious stones, Nile monitors are notoriously aggressive and ill-tempered. When cornered, a monitor will stand on its hind legs and hiss, inflating its body and lashing its tail like a bullwhip. In the words of one biologist, "No one realizes the ability this animal has to tear off your cat's head with one twist." In the wild, monitors hunt on land or in the water, climbing trees, digging up burrows, or simply chasing down their prey: an adult monitor can outrun a human, though it will usually attack only when cornered. One wildlife bulletin from the U.S. Geological Survey called the species "omnicarnivorous."

Cape Coral is forty miles from Big Cypress Swamp as the crow flies, and another twenty from the Everglades—a habitat very similar to the Upper Nile. The monitors could wreak havoc on the park's bird and turtle populations, but they seem in no great hurry to get there. The hunting is just fine where they are. Their population is now in the thousands, Todd Campbell, a biologist at the University of Tampa, told me, and growing alarmingly. Campbell has been trapping and radio-tracking the lizards for six years, with the city's help. "They're very aware, very intelligent," he said. "You look in their eyes and—I'm not being weird here—it's more like you're looking at a bird or a mammal than some dumb pea-brained snake." Monitors often hunt in packs, like modern-day velociraptors, smelling for prey with their extremely sensitive tongues. When Campbell dissects them, he finds whole clutches of turtle or bird eggs in their bellies, and large boluses of fur, often from local pets. "They will eat anything that will fit in their mouths," he said. "And if they can't fit it in they'll tear it limb from limb."

Before I left town, I visited a local schoolteacher named Robin Snyder, who'd had some run-ins with the lizards. Her house was on a cul-de-sac beside a canal, with vacant lots on either side where the lizards breed. "They're getting braver and braver," she told me. "We went on vacation last summer, and when we got back a monitor had taken over our porch. It would sit on our front patio like it was a dog." The lizards had eaten her neighbor's poodle, she added, and they liked to snack on the town's rare burrowing owls. "It's like they're having a little shrimp cocktail or something." Two years ago, Snyder was pruning a bush when a monitor took a chunk out of her hand. Another bit her Border collie on the face, nearly taking out its eye. "That dog isn't afraid of anything," she said. "But now I have to drag her outside. She smells their urine."

Snyder is an earthy brunette, fifty years old, with long, untamed hair. She grew up in the hills of Virginia and is used to having bears and bobcats around. But these things are different, she said. "They'll just come right on out in the middle of the day." The city's nuisance hunter had already trapped ten or twelve in the "lizard condominium" next to her house. And a local woman, nicknamed Annie Oakley, had shot fourteen from her window with a pellet gun. But there always seemed to be more. "People are actually eatin' 'em over at Pine Island," Snyder said. "A guy I went to school with said they're pretty good." She smirked. Her son was grown and her husband had taken a job back in Virginia, she said. "So now it's just me and the dog and the lizards." Behind her, in the deepening dusk, the waters of the canal had darkened from green to gray and the murmur of the swamp had begun to rise. "I'm homesick for the mountains," she said. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

An audio interview with Burkhard Bilger.

FICTION

A TINY FEAST

BY CHRIS ADRIAN

It took them both a long time to understand that the boy was sick, though she would point out that she had been the first to notice that he was unhappy, and had sought to remedy his discontent with sweeter treats and more delightful distractions. She thought it was evidence that she loved him more—that she had noticed first that something was wrong—and she said as much to her husband, when they were still trying to outdo each other in love for the child.

Neither of them had much experience with illness. They had each taken many mortal lovers, but had cast them off before they could become old or infirm, and all their previous changelings had stayed healthy until they were returned, unaged and unstuck from their proper times, to the mortal world. "There was no way you could have known," said Dr. Blork, the junior partner in the two-person team that oversaw the boy's care, on their very first visit with him. "Parents always feel like they ought to have caught it earlier, but really it's the same for everyone, and you couldn't have done any better than you did." He was trying to make them feel better, to assuage a perceived guilt, but at that point neither Titania nor her husband really knew what guilt was, never having felt it in all their long days.

They were in the hospital, not far from the park on the hill under which they made their home, in the middle of the night—early for them, since they slept all day under the hill and had taught the boy to do the same, but the doctors, Beadle and Blork, were obviously fatigued. The four of them were sitting at a table in a small windowless conference room, the doctors on one side, the parents on the other. The boy was back in his room, drugged with morphine, sleeping peacefully for the first time in days. The doctors were explaining things, earnestly and patiently, but Titania was having trouble following along.

"A boy should not be sick," she said suddenly to Dr. Blork, cutting him off as he was beginning to describe some of the side effects of the treatment they were proposing. "A boy should play—that is his *whole* purpose."

"It's hard to see him like this," Dr. Blork said, after a glance at his superior, "and I'm so sorry that your beautiful boy is so sick. It's going to be a long haul, and he may be sicker before he's better, but we'll get him through it." He started talking again then about the specifics, the drugs they would use—the names seemed rather demonic to her—and the timing of the treatments, which parts could be done at home and which parts must be done in the hospital. This was all of a sudden very boring. She waved her hand at them, a gesture practiced over centuries, and even though there was no magic in it, Blork was instantly quiet.

"You will do your mortal thing," she said sadly. "I know all I need to know."

"Pardon me?" Dr. Blork said.

"Leukemia!" Oberon said, breaking the silence he'd maintained all through the meeting, and it sounded as if he were somehow trying out the idea behind the word. He was smiling, and crying into his lovely beard. "Can you cure it?"

"Yes!" said Dr. Blork. But Dr. Beadle said, "Maybe."

She could not remember the quarrel that had brought her the boy. A real or perceived dalliance or slight, a transgression on her part or her husband's—who knew? They had been quarrelling for as long as they had been in love. She forgot the quarrels as soon as they were resolved, but the gifts her husband brought her to reconcile—even when she was at fault—she never forgot. The boy had been one of those gifts, brought home to the hill, stolen from his crib in the dark of the night and presented to her by dawn. "That is not sufficient to your crime against me," she remembered saying, and remembered as well that she barely paid the child any mind during her restless sleep, except to push it away from her when it rolled too close. Oberon had rubbed poppies on its eyes to quiet its crying, so it was still sleeping soundly when she woke. For a while she lay on her back, watching the stars come out upon the ceiling of her grotto, listening to the little snores. Oberon was snoring more magnificently. She turned on her side to better look at it, and noticed for the first time how comely it was, how round and smooth were its face and shoulders and belly, how lustrous was its hair. It made a troubled face as it slept. She put her hand out to touch it, just very lightly. Right away it sighed and lost the troubled look, but then it gave a moan. She draped her hand over its shoulder, and when it did not quiet she rolled it closer to her. It stopped moaning only when she held it in her arms, and put her nose in its hair, and breathed in its scent—poppies and milk and warm earth. Oberon had woken, and was looking at her and smiling, propped on one elbow with a hand against his ear, the other lost under the sheets, but she could hear that he was scratching himself. "Do you like it?" he asked.

"I am indifferent to it," she said, holding the boy closer, and squeezing him, and putting her face in his neck.

"This place is so ugly," Titania said. "Can anything be done about that?" She was talking to the oncology social worker, one of a stream of visiting strangers who came to the room, and a woman who had described herself as a person to whom one might address problems or questions that no one else could solve or answer. "Nonmedical things," she had said. "You know—everything else!"

"But you've made the room just lovely," the woman said. Her name was Alice or Alexandra or Antonia. Titania had a hard time keeping track of all the mortal names, except for Beadle and Blork, but those were distinctive names, and actually rather faerielike. Alice gestured expansively around the room, not seeing what was actually there. She saw paper stars hanging from the ceiling, and cards and posters on the wall, and a homey bedspread upon the mattress, but faeries had come to carpet the room with grass, to pave the walls with stone and set them with jewels, and to blow a cover of clouds to hide the horrible suspended ceiling. And the bedspread was no ordinary blanket but the boy's own dear Beastie, a flat headless creature of soft fur that loved him like a dog and tried to follow him out of the room whenever they took him away for some new test or procedure.

"I don't mean the room," Titania said. "I mean everything else. This whole place. And the people, of course. Where did you find them? Look at you, for instance. Are you deliberately homely? And that Dr. Blork—hideous!"

Alice cocked her head. She did not hear exactly what Titania was saying.

YVETTA FEDOROVA

FREE-RANGE CHICKENS
M. Twohy

Everything was filtered through the same normalizing glamour that hid the light in Titania's face, that gave her splendid gown the appearance of a tracksuit, that had made the boy appear clothed when they brought him in, when in fact he had been as naked as the day he was born. The same spell made it appear that he had a name, though his parents had only ever called him Boy, never having learned his mortal name, because he was the only boy under the hill. The same spell sustained the impression that Titania worked as a hairdresser, and that Oberon owned an organic orchard, and that their names were Trudy and Bob.

"You need to take care of yourself," Alice said, thinking that Titania was complaining about feeling ugly. "It might feel a little selfish, but you can't take care of him if you can't take care of yourself. Did you know we have a manicurist who comes every Wednesday?"

"You are so sweet," Titania said, "even if you are homely. Did you ever wish you had the eyes of a cat?"

"A hat? You can buy one downstairs. For when his hair falls out, you mean? That's weeks away, you know. But the baseball caps are awfully cute. But, listen, not everybody wants to talk about this at first, and not everybody has to. I'm getting ahead of myself . . . of ourselves."

"Or would you rather be a cat entirely? Yes, I think that would make you lovely." Titania raised her hands and closed her eyes, seeking words sufficient to the spell she had in mind. They came to her in an image, words printed on a little girl's purse she had glimpsed in the waiting room outside the surgical suites downstairs. She started to speak them—Hello Kitty!—but Oberon walked in before she had the first syllable out.

"What are you doing to the nurse?" he asked her.

"She's the social worker. And we were only talking." Alice's head was turned to the side, and she was staring at Titania with a mixture of curiosity and devotion. The glamour had slipped as Titania was about to strike, and the woman had seen her true face. "Her name is Alice."

"Stop playing," Oberon said. "He's almost finished. Don't you want to be there when he wakes?" The boy was downstairs having things done to him: a needle in his hip to take the marrow from his bones, and another in his neck to give him a special I.V. that would last through the weeks and months of the treatment.

"I'll just stay here and wait," she said, sitting on the bed and idly petting the Beastie when it sidled up to her.

"He'll be looking for you," Oberon said.

"You'll tell him I'm waiting here with his Beastie." She lifted it into her lap, as if to show him the truth of what she was saying. Alice, still standing between them, was looking back and forth, catching glimpses of their majesty as their mounting anger caused them to let it slip, and getting drunker on them.

"Did I give you your meal tickets yet?" she asked them. "The cafeteria is really not so bad, for what it is."

"You'd rather rest your terrible ass than comfort him. Do you love him at all?"

"More than you do, and more than you'll ever understand. You like to see him undone and ailing, but I can't bear to look at him like that."

"Those are very normal feelings," Alice said. "I validate those feelings. Haven't I been saying how hard it is to see him like this?" She turned to Oberon. "Haven't I?"

"Heartless and cowardly," Oberon said. "A most unattractive combination."

"That's normal, too," Alice said. "The anger. But don't you know it's not her that you're angry at?"

"You stupid sour cock," Titania said, and then they just called each other names, back and forth, while Alice turned back and forth so swiftly it seemed she was spinning.

"How can I make you understand how totally normal all of this is?" Alice cried aloud at last, just before collapsing in a heap. The Beastie, whose nature was to comfort, tried to go to her, but Titania held it back.

"Now look what you've done," her husband said.

At first he had been like her own sort of Beastie, a creature who followed her around and was pleasant to cuddle with. It didn't take long before he stopped his agitated weeping for the mortal parents he'd hardly known, and then he smiled for everyone, even Oberon, who barely noticed him for months. He was delightful, and she was fond of him in the way she was always fond of the changelings, and yet she had dresses and shoes of which she was just as fond. She liked to dress him and feed him, and took him to bed every night, even when Oberon complained that he did not like to have pets in the bed.

He grew. This was unexpected—she

had completely forgotten even this basic fact of human physiology since the last changeling—but quite exciting. He didn't fit anymore in the footed pajamas in which he'd been stolen, and so after that she kept him naked. Many evenings she would stare at him hoping to see him get bigger. She liked to feed him. Milk and dew and honey on her finger to start. Then she woke one morning to find him attached to her breast, and she wondered why she hadn't fed any of the other changelings this way. It was easy enough to make food come out of her nipple; not quite ordinary milk at first, and then less usual substances—weak wine and chocolate and peanut butter and yogurt.

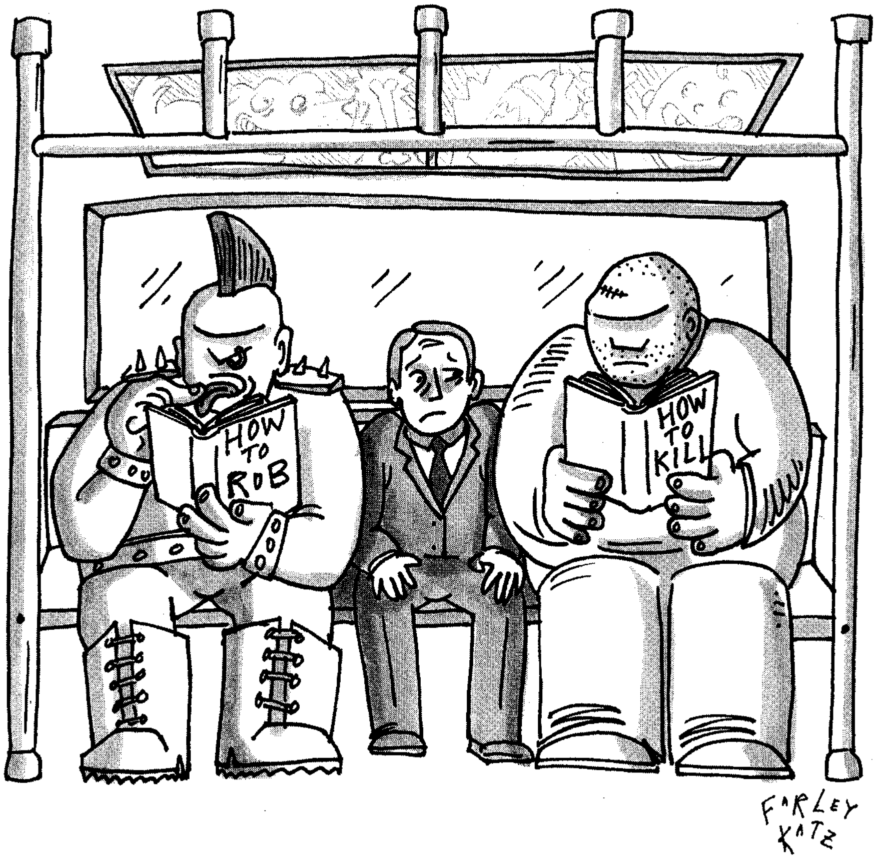
It wasn't long before Oberon regretted his gift, and started to hide the child elsewhere on the hill, attended by faeries, so that he could have his wife to himself. She tolerated that for a few weeks, but soon she couldn't stand to be apart from the boy, though she couldn't really say why. Perhaps it was because he smiled at everything she said and never argued with her; for months and months he never even said a word, only babbled.

The child grew, and changed, and became ever more delightful to her, and she imagined that they could go on forever like that, that he would always be her favorite thing. Maybe it would have been better if he had stayed her favorite thing—a toy and not a son—because now he would just be a broken toy. She ought to have had the foresight to make him dumb, or Oberon ought to have, since the boy had been his terrible gift to her. But one evening the boy ran to her and climbed upon her throne, and giggled at the dancing faerie bodies leaping and jumping all around them, and put his face to her breast, and sighed a word at her, "molly" or "moony" or "middlebury"—she still didn't know what it was exactly. But it was close enough to "Mommy" to ruin everything.

They poisoned the boy exquisitely. Beadle and Blork had reviewed it all with them, the names and the actions and the toxicities of the variety of agents they were going to use to cure him, but of that whole long conversation only a single sentence of Blork's had really stuck. "We'll poison him well," he'd said, rather too cheerily, and he had explained that the chemotherapy was harder on the cancer than on the healthy boy parts, but that it was still hard, and that for the next several months he would act like a boy who had been poisoned.

The chemotherapy came in colors—straw yellow and a red somewhere between the flesh of a watermelon and a cherry—but did not fume or smoke the way some of her own most dramatic poisons had. She peered at the bags and sniffed at the tubes, but there was nothing in them she could comprehend. She was only reluctantly interested in the particulars of the medications, but Oberon wanted to know all about them, and talked incessantly about it, parroting what Beadle and Blork had said or reading aloud from the packets of information that the nurses had given them. He proclaimed that he would taste the red liquid himself, to share the experience with the boy, but in the end he made a much lesser faerie do it, a brownie named Doorknob, who smacked his lips and proclaimed that it tasted rusty in the same way that blood smelled rusty, and went on to say that he thought he liked the taste of it and was about to sample it again when he went suddenly mad, tearing at his hair and clawing at his face and telling everyone that his bowels had become wild voles, and perhaps they had, since there was an obvious churning in his hairy little belly. Oberon knocked him over the head with his fist, which brought him sleep if not peace, and it was weeks before he was himself again.

The boy had a very different response. Right away the poisons settled him down in a way that even the morphine did not. That put him to sleep, but in between doses he woke and cried again, saying that a gator had his leg or a bear was hugging him to death or a snake had wound itself around the long part of his arm and was crushing it. Within a few days, the poisons had made him peaceful. Titania could not conceive of the way they were made, except as distillations of sadness and heartbreak and despair, since that was how she made her own poisons, shaking drops of terror out of a wren captured in her fist, or sucking with a silver straw at the tears of a dog. Oberon had voiced a fear that the boy was sick for human things, that the cancer in his blood was only a symptom of a greater ill—that he was homesick unto death. So she imagined they were putting into him a sort of liquid mortal sadness, a corrective against



a dangerous abundance of faerie joy.

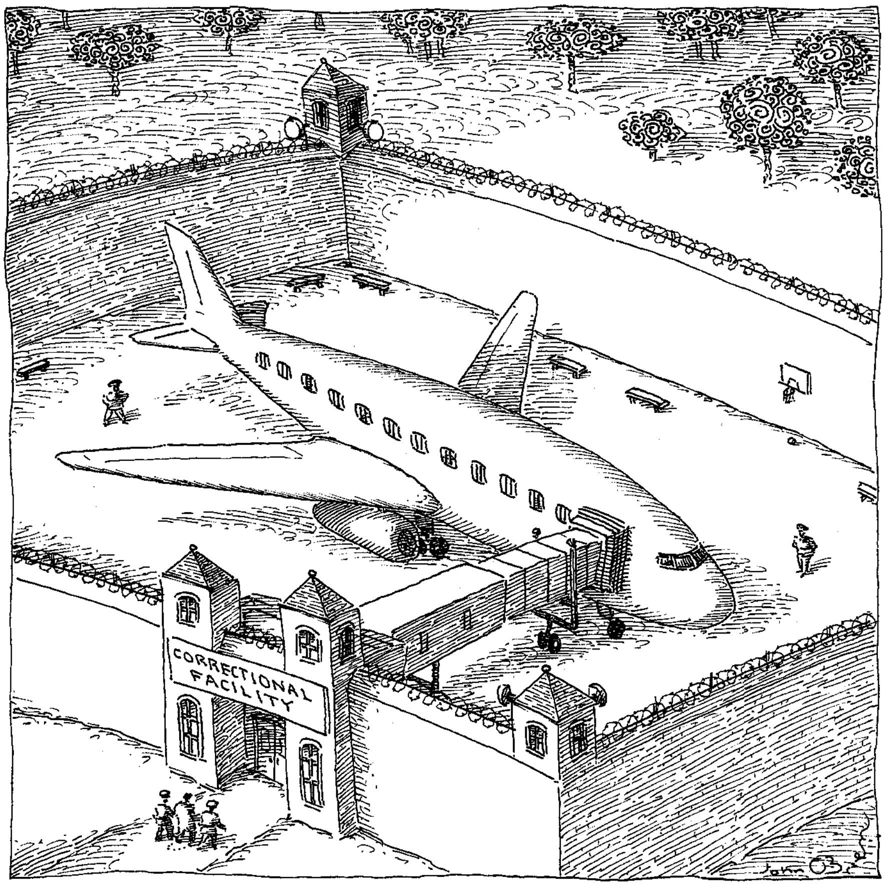
He seemed to thrive on it. If she hadn't been so distracted by relief, it might have saddened her—or brought to mind how different in kind he was from her—that a distillation of grief should restore him. His whole body seemed to suck it up, bag after bag, and then his fever broke, and the spots on his skin began to fade like ordinary bruises, and the pain in his bones went away. She watched him for hours, finally restored to untroubled sleep, and when he woke he said, "I want a cheese sandwich," and the dozen faeries hidden around the room gave a cheer.

"You heard him," she said, and ordered them with a sweep of her arm out the door and the windows. The laziest went only to the hospital cafeteria, but the more industrious ventured out to the fancy cheese shops of Cole Valley and the Castro and even the Marina, and returned with loaves under their arms and wheels of stolen cheese balanced on their heads and stuffed down their pants, Manchego and Nisa and Tomme Vaudoise, proclaiming the names to the boy as if they were announcing the names of visiting kings and queens. The room rapidly filled with cheese, and then with sandwiches, as the bread and cheese were cut and assembled. The boy chose something from the cafeteria, a plastic-looking cheese on toast. Oberon, asleep on the narrow couch beneath the window, was awakened by the variety of odors, and started to thank the faeries for his breakfast, until a pixie named Radish pointed and said in her thin, high voice, "He mounches! He mounches!" Oberon began to cry, of course. He was always crying these days, and it seemed rather showy to Titania, who thought she suffered more deeply in her silence than he did in his sobs. He gathered the boy in his arms, and the boy said, "Papa, you are getting my sandwich wet," which caused some tittering among the faeries, many of whom were crying, too, now, or laughing, or kissing each other with mouths full of rare cheese. Titania sat down on the bed and put a hand on the boy and another on her husband, and forgave Oberon his showy tears, and the boy the scare he'd given her.

Just then Dr. Blork entered the room, giving the barest hint of a knock on the door before he barged in. The faeries vanished before his eye could register them, but the cheese stayed behind, stacked in sandwiches on the dresser and the windowsill, wedged in the light fixtures and stuck to the bulletin board with pins, piled in the sink and scattered on the floor. He stared all around the room and then at the three of them.

"He was hungry," Titania said, though the glamour would obviate any need for an excuse.

"You have poisoned him masterfully!" Oberon said, and Titania asked if they could now take him home.



He was never a very useful changeling. Oberon had trained previous changelings to be pages or attendants for her, and they had learned, even as young children, to brush her hair in just the way that she liked. Or they had been instructed to sing to her, or dance a masque, or wrestle young wolves in a ring for the entertainment of the host. But the boy only hit her when she presented him with the brush, and instead she found herself brushing *his* hair.

And she sang for him, ancient dirges at first, and eldritch hymns to the moon, but he didn't like those, and Oberon suggested that she learn some music more familiar to him. So she sent Doorknob into the Haight to fetch a human musician, but he brought her back an album instead, because it had a beautiful woman on it, a lovely human mama. She looked at the woman on the cover of "The Best of Carly Simon," golden-skinned and honey-haired, with a fetching gap in her smile, and put on her aspect, and spun the record on her finger while Radish sat upon it, the stinger in her bottom protruding to scratch in the grooves, and Titania leaned close to listen to the songs. Then she sang to the boy about his own vanity, and felt a peaceful pleasure.

Oberon said she was spoiling him, that she had ruined him and that he had no hope of ever becoming a functional changeling, and in a fit of enthusiastic discipline he scolded the boy and ordered him to pick up some toys he had left scattered in the hall, and threatened to feed him to a bear if he did not. Weeping, the boy complied, but he had gathered up only a few blocks before he came to a little blue bucket on the floor. "I'm a puppy!" he said, and bent down to take the handle in his mouth. Then he began to prance all around the hall with his head high, the bucket slapping against his chin.

“That’s not what you’re supposed to be doing at all!” Oberon shouted at him, but by the time Titania entered the room, warned by Radish that Oberon was about to beat the changeling, Oberon had joined him in the game, putting a toy shovel in his teeth. Titania laughed, and it seemed to her in that moment that she had two hearts in her, each pouring out an equivalent feeling toward the prancing figures, and she thought, My men.

They were not allowed to go home. It was hardly time for that, Dr. Blork told them. The boy was barely better at all. This was going to be a three-year journey, and they were not even a week into it. They would have to learn patience if they were going to get through this. They would have to learn to take things one day at a time.

“I like to take the long view of things,” Titania said in response, and that had been true as a rule all through her long, long life. But lately her long view had contracted. Even without looking ahead into the uncertain future, she always found something to worry about. Oberon suggested she look to the boy, and model her behavior after his, which was what he was doing, to which she replied that a child in crisis needed parents, not playmates, to which he said that that wasn’t what he meant at all, and they proceeded to quarrel about it, very softly, since the boy was sleeping.

Still, she gave it a try, proceeding with the boy on one of his daily migrations through the ward. Ever since he had been feeling better, he went for multiple promenades, sometimes on foot and sometimes in a little red buggy that he drove by making skibbling motions against the floor. He had to wear a mask, and his I.V. pole usually accompanied him, but these seemed not to bother him at all, so Titania tried not to let them bother her, either, though she was pushing the pole, and had to stoop now and then to adjust his mask when it slid over his chin.

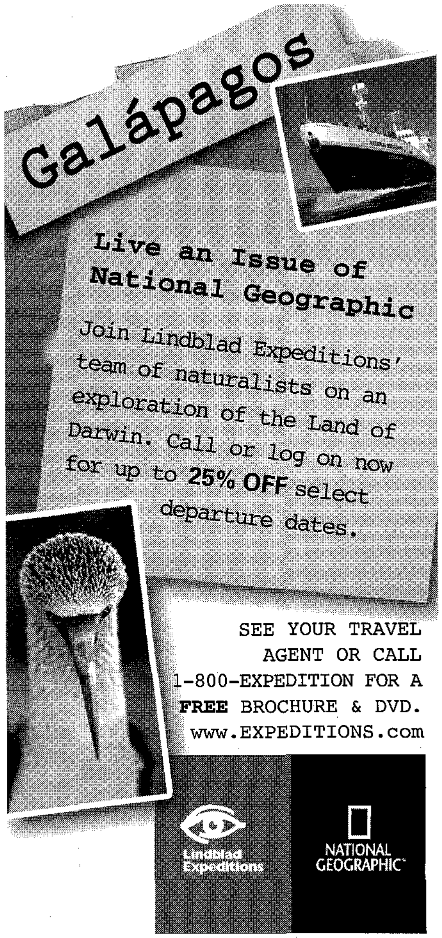
The ward was almost the ugliest place she had ever seen, and certainly the ugliest place she had ever lived. Someone had tried, some time ago, to make it pretty, so there were big photographs in the hall of children at various sorts of play, and some of these were diverting, she supposed. But the pictures were few. In other places on the wall, someone had thought to put up bas-relief cartoon faces, about the size of a child’s face, but the faces looked deformed to her eye—goblin faces—and they seemed uniformly to be in pain.

The boy was not allowed to wander beyond the filtered confines of the ward, so they went around and around, passing the posse of doctors on their rounds, and the nurses at their station, and the other parents and children making their own circumnavigations. The boy called out hello and beeped his horn at everyone they met. They called back, “Hello, Brad!” or “Hello, Brian!” or “Hello, Billy!,” since he answered to all those names. People all heard something different when they asked his name and Titania replied, “Boy.”

She walked, step by step, not thinking of anything but the ugliness of the hall, or the homeliness of Dr. Blork, or the coarseness of Dr. Beadle’s hair, or the redness of the buggy. There is no past and no future, she told herself. We have been here forever and we will be here forever. These thoughts were not exactly a comfort. She considered the other parents, staring at them as she passed, remembering to smile at them when they smiled at her. It seemed a marvel to her that any mortal should suffer for lack of love, and yet she had never known a mortal who didn’t feel unloved. There was enough love just in this ugly hallway, she thought, that no one should ever feel the lack of it again. She peered at the parents, imagining their hearts like machines, manufacturing surfeit upon surfeit of love for their children, and then wondered how something could be so awesome and so utterly powerless. A feeling like that ought to be able to move mountains, she thought, and then she wondered how she had come to such a sad place in her thoughts, when she meant to live entirely in the blank present. They went back to the room, where Oberon was playing a video game, a brownie perched on his head.

“I hate this place,” she told him.

The doctors called the good news good news, but for the bad news they always found another name. Dr. Blork would say that they had taken a little detour on the way to recovery, or that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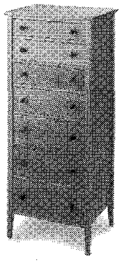
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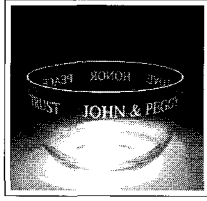
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they had encountered a minor disappointment; rarely, when things really took a turn for the worse, he'd admit that the news was, if not bad, then not very good. It was an unusual experience, to wait anxiously every morning for the day's news, and to read it in the slips of paper that detailed the results of the previous day's tests, and in the faces of the people who brought the news, in the pitch of their voices, and in the absences they embraced—the words they did not use and the things they did not say.

Oberon said the way that good news followed bad news, which followed good news on the tail of bad news, made him feel as if he were sailing in a ship on dangerous swells, or riding an angry pony. Titania was the only one among them ever to have ridden on a roller coaster, but she didn't offer up the experience as an analogy, because it seemed insufficient to describe a process that to her felt less like a violent unpredictable ride than like someone ripping your heart out one day and then stuffing it back in your chest the next. She was starting to believe that more than anything they had only lucky days and unlucky, that some cruel arbitrator, mightier than either she or her husband, was presiding over this illness, and she wasn't always convinced when Beadle or Blork told them that something was working, that something they'd done was making the boy better.

His leukemia went away, which was good news, but not very quickly, which was bad news. His white blood cells would not grow back, which was bad news, and yet it would have been worse news if he had had too many of them. He had no fever, which was good news, until he got one, and that was very bad, though Blork seemed to intimate, in his stuttering way, that there were worse things that might happen. It meant that they could not go home, although Beadle and Blork were always promising that a trip home was just around the corner. In the third week, the fever went away, and the white blood cells began to come back, but then Dr. Blork arrived with a droopy slip of paper announcing that the white blood cells were the evil, cancerous sort, and Titania could tell that there was not much worse news he could think of to be telling them. Beadle and Blork shuffled the boy's poisons, and brought him shots of thick white liquid that they shoved into his thighs. The shots made him scream like nothing else had, and she could not bear to be in the room when it happened, because she could not bear the look the boy gave her, which asked so clearly, "Shouldn't you kill them for hurting me like this?" The new poison turned him around again; the evil cells began to retire from his blood and his bones. But then his innards became irritated, and they decided that, though he was always ravenous, he couldn't eat.

"It's a crime," Oberon said. "Damn the triglycerides, the boy is hungry!" The nurses had hung up a bag of liquid food for him, honey-colored liquid that went directly into his veins. Oberon slapped at the bag, and said that it didn't look very satisfying. He fed the boy a bun, and a steak, and a crumpled cream puff, pulling each piece of food from his pocket with a flourish. Titania protested, and threatened to get the nurse, and even held the call button in her hand, almost pressing it while the boy shoved steak into his mouth and Oberon laughed. The boy threw it all up in an hour, the steak looking practically unchanged, and became listless and squash-colored for three days. When they were asked if the boy had eaten anything, Oberon only shrugged.

But as soon as the boy recovered, he was crying again for food, pleading with them all the time, no matter how the nurses fiddled with the bag that was supposed to keep him sated. One morning, the whole team showed up: Beadle and Blork and the junior-junior doctors whose names Titania could never remember and Alice and the nurse and another two or three mortals whose function, if it was something besides just skulking about, she never did discover. When Dr. Blork asked him how he was doing, he pleaded with the doctors, too.

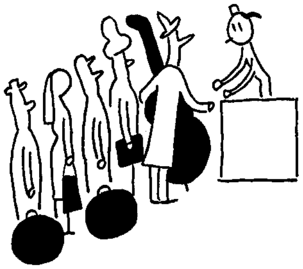
"Can't I have one tiny little feast?" he asked, and they laughed at him. They chucked his chin and tousled the place where his hair had been, and then they went out, leaving her with this dissatisfied, suffering creature. "Mama, please," he said all day, "just one little feast. I won't ask again, I promise." Oberon was silent, and left the room eventually, once again crying his useless tears, and Titania told the boy again that he would only become sick if he ate. "Don't think of eating," she said. "Think of this bird, instead." And she pulled a parrot out from the folds of her robe. But the boy asked if he could eat it.

He wore her down toward evening. Oberon had still not returned, and every time she sent Radish to fetch him the pixie said, "He's still weeping. See?" And she held up a thimble brimming with tears. Titania sighed, wanting to run from the boy and his anxious, unhappy hunger, which had seemed to her, as the day dragged on, to represent, and then to become, a hunger for something besides food. He didn't want food. He wanted to be well, to run on the hill in the starlight, to ride on the paths in the park in a cart pulled by six raccoons. He wanted to spend a day not immersed in hope and hopelessness.

"All right, love," she said, "just one bite." And she took out a chocolate from her bag, but before she could give it to him Oberon returned, calling for her to stop because he had something better. He cleared a space on the bed and put down a little sack, and very delicately, pinching with his thumb and his forefinger, removed all the elements of a tiny feast and laid them on the bed.

"It will be faster if you help," he told her as he squinted to chop up a mote-size carrot. So she picked up a bag the size of her thumb, emptied out the beans from within, and began to snap. The boy kept trying to eat things raw at first, but Oberon slapped his hand away and told him to be patient, and eventually he helped as well, twisting the heads off the little chickens when Oberon handed them to him, and laughing when they danced for a few seconds in his palm. It took a long time to prepare the feast, though they had more and more help, as more faeries popped up in the room, some of whom were better sized for the work. Still more of them gathered round in an audience, stuck to the walls, crowding the shelves, perched on the lintel, all of them muttering opinions as the preparations went on—they would have baked, not seared, that fish, and salted the cabbage but not the asparagus, and chosen caramel over fudge for the cake.

When it was done, the boy ate the whole thing, and did not share a morsel, which was exactly as it was supposed to be. Aside from the size of it, there was nothing magical about the food. It shouldn't have sated him any more than half a dozen peanuts, but even the aroma calmed him down as they were cooking, and by the time he had finished off the last tack-size pastry and dime-size cake he was very quiet again. He looked around the room, as if for more food, and when he opened his mouth wide Titania thought he was going to shout or cry. But he burped instead, a tiny little noise, commensurate with what he had eaten.



She had lost him once, just for a little while. He liked to hide, but didn't do it very well, too giggly to ever keep his location a secret. But she woke one evening to discover him gone from his customary place underneath her arm, and she couldn't find him in the usual spots, in a lump under the covers at the foot of the bed, or on the floor next to the bed, or even under the bed. "Is this a game?" she asked her husband, shaking him awake, and she demanded, "Where have you hidden the boy?"

He had not hidden him anywhere, and no faerie had made off with him, or used his parts in a spell, or put him in a pie to eat. But all through the early hours of the evening he was nowhere to be found, though she commanded the whole host to search for him under the hill. She began to suspect that his mortal mother had stolen him back, and without even doing her the courtesy of returning the hobgoblin that had been left in his place. Oberon could not convince her of how extremely unlikely this would be, and she strapped on her armor, greave by greave. For a while Oberon was able to get it off of her as fast as she could put it on, nuzzling her and speaking ever so soothingly about how the boy would be found. But eventually she outstripped him. She placed her helm on her head and called the host to war, and all the peace-loving faeries of Buena Vista Park reluctantly put on their silver mail and took up their ruby-tipped spears and made

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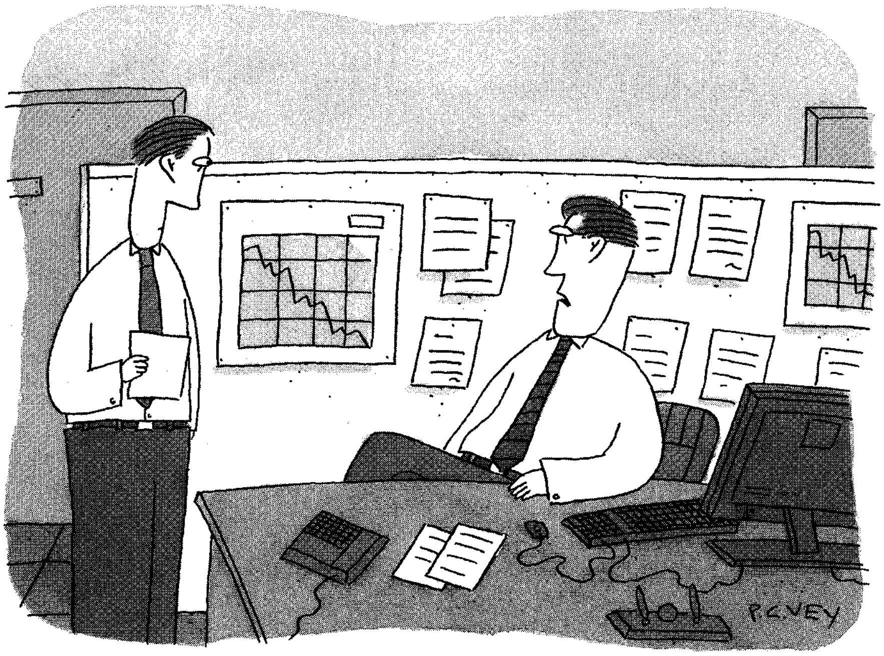

“When I was a child, I lost childish amounts of money, but when I became a man I put away childish losses and started losing man-sized amounts of money.”

• •

ready to stream out into the Mission to slay the woman who had stolen their mistress’s child. In the end, Doorknob found him before they could march out of the woods. He was under a cupboard, sound asleep, and one had only to sniff at him to understand that he had wandered thirsty from bed to the kitchen and drunk at length from the wine bowl instead of the water bowl, and perhaps had had a solitary toddling drunken party all his own before hiding himself away to sleep. Titania wanted to kiss him and hold him, of course, but it occurred to her that there were other things she could do right then instead: shrink him down enough to carry him around in her mouth, or make him a hump on her back, or chain him to her, foot to foot. He woke as she was considering these things, and blinked at her, and then at the faeries, all attired for war, and turned on his side and went back to sleep.

“What a terrible gift you have given me,” she said to her husband. They were sitting at the boy’s bedside, not holding hands, though their knees were touching. There had been bad news, and then worse news, and then the worst news yet. The evil cells were back in his blood, and he had a fever, and there was an infection in the bones of his face. Dr. Blork had said that a fungus was growing there, and had admitted that this news was, in fact, bad, and he had looked both awkward and grave as he sat with them, twisting his stethoscope around in his hands and apologizing for the turn of events, though not exactly accepting responsibility for the failures of the treatment. Oberon had said that mushrooms were some of the friendliest creatures he knew, and that he could not understand how they could possibly represent a threat to anyone, but Blork shook his head, and said that this fungus was nobody’s friend, and further explained that the presence of the new infection compromised the doctors’ ability to poison the boy anymore, and that for that reason the leukemia cells were having a sort of holiday.

The boy was sleeping. They had brought back the morphine for his pain, so he was rarely awake, and was not very happy when he was. Titania moved from her chair to the bed, and took his hand. Even asleep, he pulled it away. “A terrible gift,” she said.

“Don’t say such things,” Oberon said.

“Terrible.” She sat on the bed, taking the boy’s hand over and over as he pulled it away, and told her husband that she was afraid that when the boy died he would take with him not just all the love she felt for him but all the love she felt for Oberon, too, and all the love she had felt for anything or anyone in the world. He would draw it after him, as if in obeisance to some natural law that magic could not violate, and then she would be left with nothing.

“Do not speak of such things, my love,” her husband said, and he kissed her. She let him do that. And she let him put his hands inside her dress, and let him draw her over to the narrow couch where they were supposed to sleep at night. She tried to pretend that it was any other night under the hill when they would roll and wrestle with each other while the boy slept next to them, oblivious. They were walked in upon a number of times. But everyone saw something different, and none of them remembered what they had seen after they turned and fled the room. The night nurse, coming in to change some I.V. fluids, saw two blankets striking and grappling with each other on the couch. A nursing assistant saw a mass of snakes and cats twisting over one another, sighing and hissing. Dr. Blork actually managed to perceive Oberon’s mighty thrusting bottom, and went stumbling back out into the hall, temporarily blinded.

One evening, Dr. Beadle came in alone, Blorkless, and sat down on the bed, where the boy was sweating and sleeping, dreaming, Titania could tell, of something unpleasant. “I think it’s time to talk about our goals for Brad,” he said, and put a hand on the Beastie over the boy’s foot, and wiggled the foot back and forth as he talked, asking them whether they were really doing the best thing for the boy, whether they should continue with a treatment that was not making him better.

“What else would we do?” Titania asked him, not understanding what he was saying, but suddenly not wanting him in the room, or on the bed, or touching the boy.

“We would make him comfortable,” he said.

"Isn't he comfortable?" Titania asked. "Isn't he sleeping?"

"Not . . . finally," Dr. Beadle said. "We could be doing more, and less. We could stop doing what isn't helping, and not do anything that would prolong . . . the suffering." Then Oberon, who had been eying the man warily from the couch, leaped up, shouting, "Smotherer! Smother doctor! Get back to Hell!"

"You don't understand," Dr. Beadle said. "I don't mean that at all. Not at *all!*" He looked at Titania with an odd combination of pleading and pity. "Do you understand?" he asked her. In reply, she drew herself up and shook off every drop of the disguising glamour, and stood there entirely revealed to him. He seemed to shrink, and fell off the bed, and while he was not purposefully kneeling in front of her, he happened to end up on his knees. She leaned over him and spoke very slowly.

"You will do everything mortally possible to save him," she said.

The night the boy died, there were a number of miraculous recoveries on the ward. It was nothing that Titania did on purpose. She did not care about the other pale bald-headed children in their red wagons and masks, did not care about the other mothers, whose grief and worry seemed to elevate their countenances to resemble Titania's own. Indifference was the key to her magic; she could do nothing for someone she loved. So all the desperate hope she directed at the boy was made manifest around her in rising blood counts and broken fevers and unlikely remissions. It made for a different sort of day—with so much good news around, it seemed as if hardly anyone noticed that the boy had died.

Oberon sat on the floor in a corner of the room, trying to quiet the broken-hearted wailing of the Beastie, but not making a sound himself. Titania sat on the bed with the boy. A nurse had been in to strip him of his tubes and wires, and had drawn a sheet up to just under his chin. His eyes were closed, and his face looked oddly less pale than it had in life and illness. The glamour was in tatters; Oberon was supposed to be maintaining it, and now Titania found she didn't really care enough to take up the work. No nurse had been in for hours, and the last to come in had lain down upon the clover-covered floor and giggled obtrusively until some thoughtful faerie had put an egg in her mouth to shut her up. Before she had gone drunk, she'd mentioned something about funeral arrangements, and Titania was thinking of those now. "We should bring him home," she said aloud, and no one stirred, but she said it again every few minutes, and by twos and threes the faeries crowding the room began to say it, too, and then they started to build a bier for him, tearing out the cabinets and bending the I.V. pole and ripping up the sheets and blankets. When they were done, the walls were stripped and the furniture was wrecked. Twelve faeries of more or less equal size bore the bier, and they waited while another dozen brownies hammered at the doorway to widen the exit. When they were ready, they all looked to Titania, who nodded her permission. Oberon was the last to leave, standing only when Doorknob tugged at his arm after the room had emptied.

There was no disguise left to cover them. People saw them for what they were, a hundred and two faeries and a dead boy proceeding down the hall with harps and flutes, crowded in the service elevator with fiddles and lutes, marching out of the hospital with drums. Mortals gaped. Dogs barked. Cats danced on their hind feet, and birds followed them by the dozens, hopping along and cocking their heads from side to side. It was early afternoon. The fog was breaking against the side of the hill, leaving Buena Vista Park brilliantly sunny. They passed through the ordinary trees of the park, and then into the extraordinary trees of their own realm, and came to the door in the hill, and passed through that as well.

They marched into the great hall, and put down the bier. The music played on for a while, then faltered little by little, as each player came to feel unsure of why they were playing. Then the hall was quiet, because they didn't know what to do next. They had never celebrated or mourned a death before. They were all looking to Titania to speak, but it was Oberon who finally broke the silence, announcing from the back of the room that the Beastie had died of its grief. ♦

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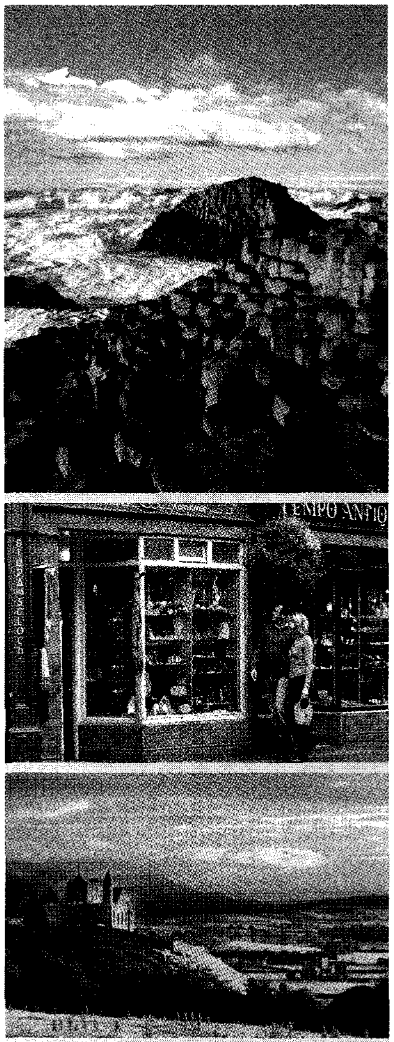

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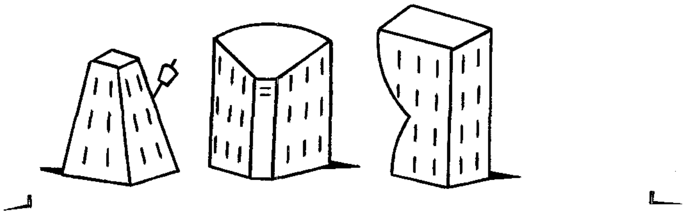


POP MUSIC

LIVING ON THE RADIO

The-Dream is everywhere.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

One way to understand social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace is to consider that younger digital natives are not necessarily being exhibitionists when they post photographs of themselves and share personal details there. Instead, these users are living a life in which consciousness is spread out evenly over two platforms: real life and the Web. Rather than feeling schizophrenic or somehow pathological, digital natives understand that these two realms divide the self much as speech and the written word divide language, a division that humans have lived with for a long time without going bonkers. One relationship that closely mirrors this new digital life is that of the professional songwriting team—the platinum assembly-line workers who write for a variety of artists, including themselves. Whether it's Leiber and Stoller, in the fifties, Goffin and King, in the sixties, or Terius (The-Dream) Nash and Christopher (Tricky) Stewart, in the aughts, there are duos whose work is spread across the charts the way a tween is distributed across multiple platforms. Right now, you could find yourself thinking that you're listening to a wide variety of songwriters only to discover that Nash and Stewart have written and produced a big chunk of the songs you're hearing. The many can be the one, and it may be that the invisible hand is more important than the faces out front. Nash and Stewart are currently two of the biggest hands in R. & B. and pop, and Nash is also making a reasonable run for it as a solo artist, The-Dream.

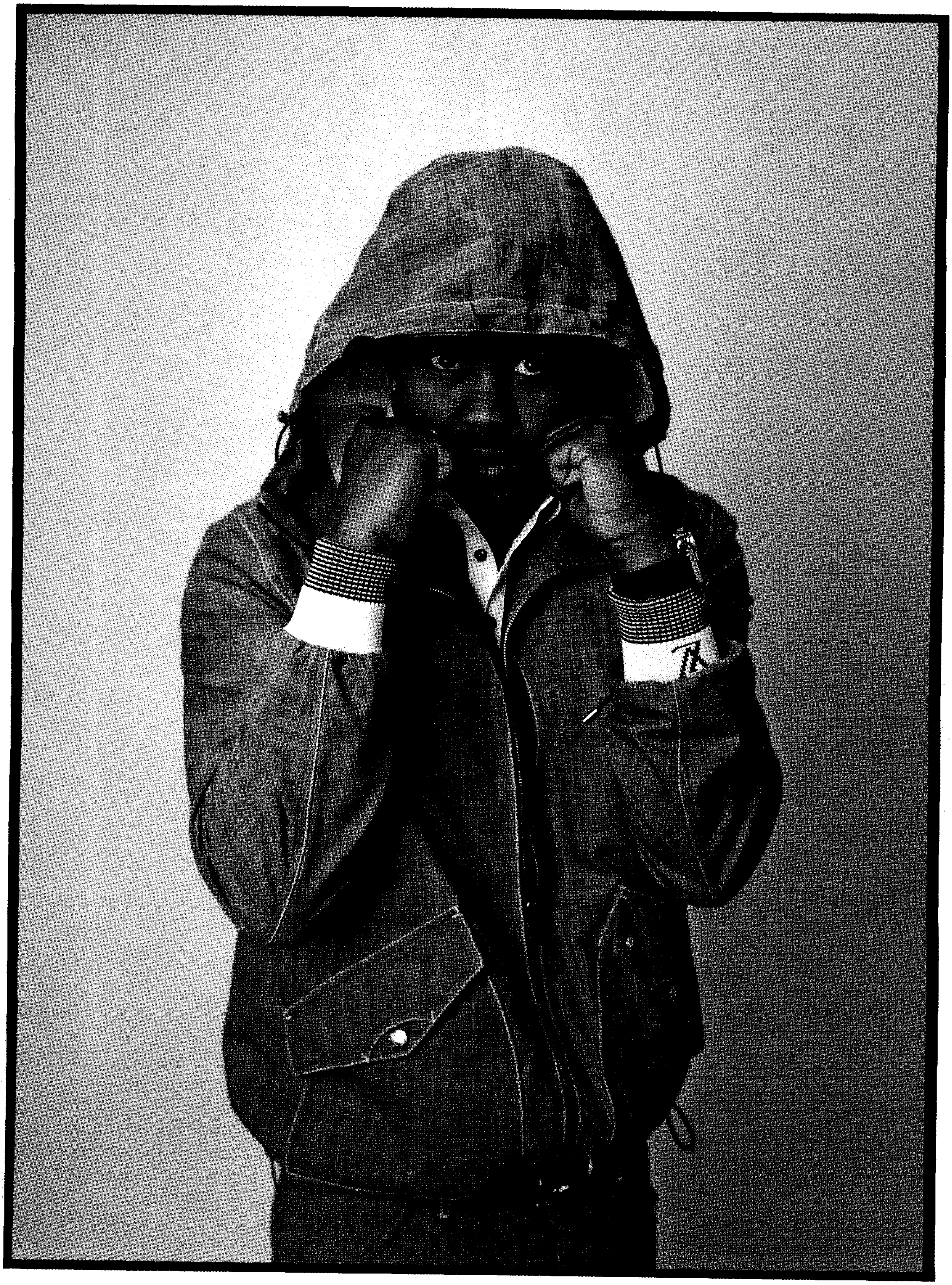
Nash and Stewart met in the late nineties in Atlanta, where Stewart was already an established record producer. Nash had written several songs for minor R. & B. groups, but he and Stewart trebled their yield by teaming up a few years later. Their first collaboration was "Me Against the Music," a 2003 single for Britney Spears. It stands out now, as it did then, for sounding little like other Spears or other songs on the charts. It is an unusually fast pop song, around a hundred and twenty B.P.M., and combines the humming impact of a Roland TR-808 drum machine, some clattering live drums, and an acoustic guitar. Spears's vocals move around from rapid-fire speak-singing to her typically restrained harmony vocals and a few strange ad-libs. The song wasn't a monster hit so much as an announcement that Nash and Stewart weren't scared to step up to a major artist and do something unexpected.

Stewart is generally responsible for "the track"—all the music beneath the vocals—and Nash writes the lyrics and the "top line," the melody driving those words. (Nash occasionally works on the track as well, but he's mainly in charge of the singing, sometimes in concert with the artist whom the duo is writing for.) This team is most comfortable in R. & B., and that's where the two began developing their signature sound. J. Holiday's "Bed" was one of 2007's biggest slow and sexy songs. Until Nash started releasing records as The-Dream, toward the end of 2007, you wouldn't have known that J. Holiday was singing almost exactly like Nash himself, who can be heard in the background singing "eh eh eh eh." "Bed" seems like a standard slow jam, but Nash does two things to set it apart. In a field of callow sex songs that are generally celebrations of the singer's skills, "Bed" is genuinely sweet. The singer runs his fingers through his partner's hair, and sums up his aims with the nicely ambiguous "I'm trying to put you to bed." The singing moves between traditional melodic passages and sequences in which Holiday sounds like he's splitting the difference between talking and singing, a trick that R. Kelly has made great use of. And then, as the song goes on, this one sound keeps returning: "eh eh," and its slant rhyme "bed, bed, bed." The word repeats over and over, but doesn't rise or change: the singer is looping himself, like a machine.

That "eh eh" and its cousin "ella ella" were part of a song released a few months earlier, considered by many to be the biggest of 2007: Rihanna's "Umbrella." Nash wrote the first two verses and the chorus, over a rough sketch by Stewart that was nothing more than slow, trashy drums and a keyboard line. "I usually don't do second verses," Nash told me. "I just do the first verse and do the hook." He continued, "I went ahead and finished the record because I wanted to send it out to a label as soon as possible, because I felt like it was a smash record. I put the second verse on it and the bridge, and it was a ballgame."

After Britney Spears turned down the song, it eventually reached Rihanna, who grabbed it and probably doubled the magnitude of her career. What the writers and the singer ended up doing will likely define them even a decade from now. The final version is dominated by dark swaths of synthesizers that are anything but cheerful, moving from single hits on the downbeats to long, sustained notes in the chorus that sound more than a little like distorted electric guitars. Nash's vocal line, though, is straight out of a musical, as sweet as "Bed," though more PG. "Now

PHILIPPE WEISBECKER



A nimble singer with a sheer, flexible falsetto, The-Dream can sound carefree no matter what the topic. Photograph by Steve Pyke.

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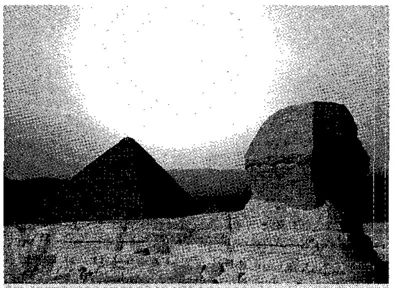

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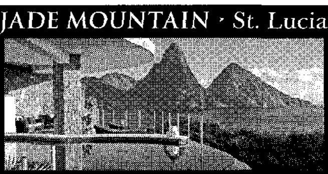

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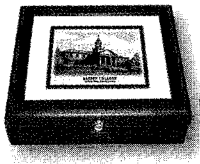

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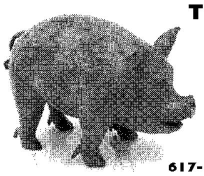

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that it's raining more than ever, know that we'll still have each other, you can stand under my umbrella, you can stand under my umbrella." And then: "ella, ella, eh eh eh," which Nash has called "the dumb part" in interviews. It's pretty easy to get, even on first listen.

Rihanna, not a spectacularly gifted singer, does something essential to Nash's melody. Nash is a nimble singer with a sheer, flexible falsetto, able to sound completely carefree, no matter what the topic. Rihanna flattens out Nash's lyrics in "Umbrella," making them feel a little less anodyne. The song is a promise to protect and love, which Rihanna turns into a moment of both dedication and doubt. It's a sappy song that sounds totally unsappy, a feat that many people have paid Nash and Stewart to repeat.

The closest they've come is by, naturally, avoiding "Umbrella" altogether. Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" is the duo's runner-up hit, though it may be more surprising musically. While "Umbrella" brilliantly plays doubt against devotion, "Single Ladies" combines a jumble of feelings and sounds that don't resolve but also never become tiring. What is all that clapping? What is that ascending whistle in the background? Why is Beyoncé singing a little bit like she's leading a boot-camp maneuver? The lyrics seem to express anger that Beyoncé's man failed to "put a ring on it," though the song is generally jubilant, and even the synthesizer swells sound more excited than ominous. Beyoncé also can't be written out of her own, pure, glimmering voice, no matter whose cadence she's hired.

More typical of Nash and Stewart's work is Mariah Carey's "Touch My Body." Carey is able to sing in exactly the same paper-light range as Nash, who has a tendency to upend expectations. "Touch My Body" is a modified slow jam, certainly about sex but slightly quicker in tempo and goofy in approach. Carey brackets her singing about touching and wrestling and wrapped thighs with a promise that if her bedroom encounter ends up on YouTube she will hunt her lover down. It skips and chimes and sounds as if it would evaporate if it touched a solid surface. And that is how Nash and Stewart like to play it when Nash steps forward as The-Dream.

I am partial to The-Dream's first album, "Love/Hate," from 2007. The first single, "Shawty Is a Ten," was a bubble that refused to burst. Nash is a branding fiend, and so the song is full of "eh"s (some of which cut verse lines into odd little pieces) and the name of his new label, Radio Killa Records. Stewart limits himself to a tiny clump of rhythm and a piano chord marching gently on each beat. Nash's voice swirls as he sings about a series of tens who have come and gone: Keisha, Sonya, Tanya, Kiki. One of the moodier songs on "Love/Hate," "Nikki," evokes the breakup of Nash's marriage to the singer Nivea. It's a dark song that stays dark, and Nash's trick here is to leave his voice lower than usual and avoid the prettier range he goes to so easily. His old love is in a new house, which he calls "awful cold," but then he boasts that he's already "making love to Nikki." It's unusually callow for a Nash song, and sounds an awful lot like the template for Kanye West's forlorn "808s & Heartbreak" album.

West appears on "Love vs. Money," the latest The-Dream album. And in their collaboration, "Walkin' on the Moon," you can hear that Nash and Stewart, while steeped in hip-hop, have been generally detaching R. & B. from hip-hop and returning it to its softer roots. (When I heard Nash sing part of Lenny Williams's epic seventies ballad "'Cause I Love You" over the phone, I realized it takes a tough man to embrace the tender stuff, and that's Nash's wheelhouse now.) There is a little bit of rapping on both The-Dream albums, and on some of Nash and Stewart's hits, but it has steadily diminished in presence over the years, and the song West raps over is basically a disco tune. Hip-hop allowed R. & B. singers to become aggressive again, to make the language blunt, and to admit a little bit of selfishness into the nice-guy routine. Having run that particular program, R. & B. is now following Stewart and Nash to a more subtle and complex area, where aggression and tenderness are equally represented. ♦

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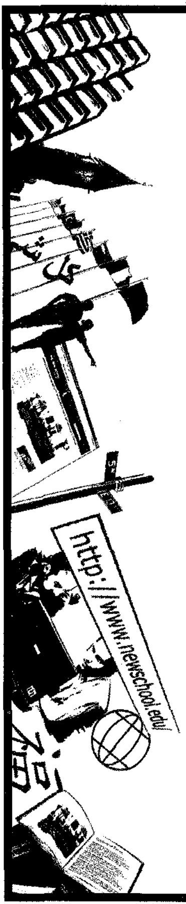

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

ENAMELED LADY

How Katherine Anne Porter perfected herself.

BY HILTON ALS

New York, after the war. A young writer—more of a hustler, really—named P. B. Jones attends a publishing party full of artists and literary types. There he meets an older, established author he has long admired named Alice Lee Langman; he eventually becomes her lover for a time. Langman, says Jones, who narrates Truman Capote's underrated, unfinished final novel, "Answered Prayers," is "a perfected presence, an enameled lady."

> When I met Miss Langman, and I never called her anything else, she was far into her late fifties, yet she looked eerily unaltered from her long-ago Genthe portrait. The author of *Wild Asparagus* and *Five Black Guitars* had eyes the color of Anatolian waters, and her hair, a sleek silvery blue, was brushed straight back, fitting her erect head like an airy cap. . . .
>
> She said, that first night at Boaty's: "Would you see me home? I hear thunder, and I'm afraid of it."
>
> She was not afraid of thunder, nor of anything else—except unreturned love and commercial success. Miss Langman's exquisite renown, while justified, was founded on one novel and three short-story collections, none of them much bought or read outside academia and the pastures of the cognoscenti. Like the value of diamonds, her prestige depended upon a controlled and limited output; and, in those terms, she was a royal success, the queen of the writer-in-residence swindle, the prizes racket, the high-honorarium con, the grants-in-aid-to-struggling-artists shit. Everybody, the Ford Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Council on the Arts, the Library of Congress, et al., was hell-bound to gorge her with tax-free greenery, and Miss Langman, like those circus midgets who lose their living if they grow an inch or two, was ever aware her prestige would collapse if the ordinary public began to read and reward her.

Capote's portrait of Langman is a vivid vivisection of the writer Katherine Anne Porter, whom Capote first met at Yaddo, the artists' colony, in the ninteen-forties, when he was in his early twenties and she was in her fifties. By then, Porter had published three critically acclaimed story collections but had little popular appeal.

She did eventually attain commercial success. Her first and only novel, "Ship of Fools," published in 1962, when she was seventy-one years old, was the best-selling novel in America that year, and movie rights sold to the producer and director Stanley Kramer for four hundred thousand dollars—granting Porter financial, if not emotional, security in her old age. She had worked on the book for nearly twenty years, and had talked about it every step of the way. The novel's intended publishers died before it appeared. When it did come out, it was criticized, in some circles, for being too superficial. A thick book remarkable for its concision—the many plot points move along at a good clip—"Ship of Fools" is less a masterwork than a piece of cinema, a detailed script about the lost and the damned and the tragedy of history that no man can escape. The book is set aboard the Vera, a passenger freighter, as it makes a twenty-seven-day journey from Veracruz to Germany in the summer of 1931. On board, Germans, Americans, Spaniards, and Mexicans, ranging from the peasant class to the drug-addicted aristocracy, bicker, fight, love, and philosophize. In a trenchant review of the book in this magazine, Howard Moss wrote that "Ship of Fools" is "a novel of character rather than of action." What draws our interest isn't political or moral action but Porter's characters' inability to access either; the protagonists, like those of Porter's short fiction, are caught between solipsism and avarice—their emotional rock and a hard place—while the undertow of poverty, politics, and history threatens to pull them down and silence them forever.

Although "Ship of Fools" is not part of the Library of America's handsome recent edition "Katherine Anne Porter: Collected Stories and Other Writings," edited by Darlene Harbour Unrue ($40), it's interesting to read it alongside her other work, if only because it confirms Porter's superiority as a writer in the short form. (Her last volume, "The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1966.) As Moss noted, "'Ship of Fools' differs from her extraordinary stories and novellas in that it lacks a particular magic she has attained so many times on a smaller scale. The missing ingredient is impulse. . . . The stories read as if they were composed at one sitting, and they have the spontaneity of a running stream." In fact many of Porter's stories *were* written on the run—from the fiscal burdens, romantic hardships, and unfinished work that she could never put behind her.

Born in central Texas in 1890, Porter was the first modern white woman writer to turn Southern racism and machismo and their ramifications into art. She had an enormously liberating influence on the generation of Southern writers that followed hers: one can often hear her voice in the works of Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers. Unlike them, though, Porter wasn't a particularly regional writer; she could write equally comfortably about Louisiana or Mexico, Texas or Germany—to name just four of the places she lived. And from the time she started publishing fiction, in 1922, she was determined to avoid the pitfalls of autobiography. "It is the intention of the writer to write fiction, after all—real fiction, not a *roman à clef*, or a thinly disguised personal confession which better belongs to the psychoanalyst's séance," she once wrote. Still, despite this overreaching comment, Porter's most vibrant work springs from her own life. She was at her most assured when she was writing about the poverty and the dust, the casual racism and the surreal violence of her native state.

"I am the grandchild of a lost War, and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation," Porter wrote in a 1944 essay, "Portrait: Old South." Christened Callie Russell Porter, she was the fourth child of Harrison and Mary Alice Jones Porter, a farmer and a former schoolteacher, who reared their brood on a somewhat shabby farm in Indian Creek, Texas. (Mary Alice's father had purchased the property in 1883, shortly after his wife was declared insane and institutionalized.) In 1892, the Porters' fifth child was born; two months after the birth, the mother died, a blow from which Harrison Porter never recovered. In his grief, he couldn't properly comfort, let alone pay attention to, his

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Porter in 1946: "I started out with nothing in the world but a kind of passion," she said. Photograph by George Platt Lynes.

children. And when he did focus on them the lion's share of his affection went to his youngest daughter, whom the family nicknamed Baby, and whom Katherine Anne forever resented. Porter complained to her older sister, Gay, "No wonder our mother died of pneumonia after the exposure of childbirth in January in that house!" In short, she blamed her father for her mother's death—he hadn't taken good enough care of her, or his children.

Soon after Mary Alice died, Harrison Porter moved the family to Kyle, Texas, where his mother, Catharine Ann Skaggs Porter, had a house, and a small farm nearby. Petite, fierce, and independent, the Kentucky-born matriarch, known as Cat, had been a widow for some time. (She claimed that her late husband had been a Confederate soldier.) According to Porter, Cat loved to dress and adorn herself, and "talk with friends or listen to music." "She did not in the least like pinching or saving and mending and making things do," Porter recalled. In order to avoid acknowledging the dirt trap she called home, Cat made up stories about the family's glorious past, replete with plantations and servants and a fine lineage.

Porter took after Cat. She, too, was a born fabulist, the heroine of her own dreams, a striver with a moral disgust for poverty and a snob's belief in hierarchy: to be richer was to be better. Writing of her grandmother in 1944, Porter noted, "The long difficulties of her life she regarded as temporary, an unnatural interruption to her normal fate, which required simply a firmness, a good deal of will power and energy and the proper aims to re-establish finally once more." She might as well have been describing herself. Throughout her

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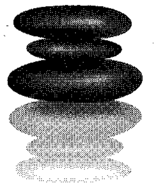

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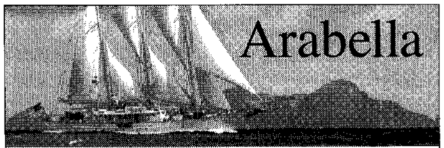

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life, Porter believed that her "normal fate" would include the love of a strong man and a life of comfort. Her failure to acquire either led to a certain "inclination to romance," as Elizabeth Hardwick observed in a 1984 piece about her friend. "As I look back over the attachments I knew about from gossip or otherwise, I see in them a conscious and careful make believe.... Katherine Anne knew the impossible when she met it."

In 1901, Cat died suddenly, and Harrison uprooted the children yet again, taking them to stay with relatives in other parts of Texas and Louisiana. Porter's only constant in those years was reading—she devoured Shakespeare, Voltaire, and Gibbon, among other writers. She also developed a preternatural ability to reinvent herself. While enrolled briefly at a Methodist school for girls in San Antonio, the fourteen-year-old Porter asked her family and friends to start calling her Katherine, in honor of her grandmother. Encouraged by a drama teacher at the school, and now a black-haired, pale-skinned beauty, she performed several times with a travelling theatre company. When, in the fall of 1905, the family moved again, this time to Victoria, Texas, a city near the Gulf of Mexico, Porter placed an ad in the local paper, offering her services as an instructor in "music, physical culture, and dramatic reading." Barely in her mid-teens, the nascent artist was searching for the form best suited to her sensibility. As she saw it, stardom of one sort or another was her only ticket out of Texas. "I started out with nothing in the world but a kind of passion, a driving desire," Porter told Barbara Thompson in 1963, in an interview for *The Paris Review*. "I don't know where it came from, and I don't know why—or why I have been so stubborn about it that nothing could deflect me."

In 1906, however, when Porter was sixteen, she gave up her independence to marry John Henry Koontz, the twenty-one-year-old son of a wealthy Texas rancher with a spread in Inez. Two years into the marriage, the couple relocated to Houston, where Koontz took a job at a cotton company. Three years after that, they moved to Corpus Christi, so that he could establish himself as a travelling salesman. By that point, Porter's days were marked by violence, and not the luxury she craved. In 1909, Koontz, often drunk, had knocked her unconscious and thrown her down the stairs. A year or two later, she suffered a miscarriage. In 1913, after undergoing surgery for an ovarian cyst, she instructed her husband to take his pleasures elsewhere. In between these hardships, she converted to Catholicism, her husband's faith, and read the lives of the saints, finding particular solace in the stories that involved martyrdom. And she ran. Over and over, she fled the marriage, staying with family members or friends, only to return to Koontz again, until, in 1914, at the age of twenty-three, she left him for good, ending what would turn out to be her longest relationship. She bought a one-way train ticket to Chicago, where she supported herself as a movie extra for a while, and published a prose sketch in the Chicago *Tribune*. When the divorce was final, the following year, she officially changed her name to Katherine Porter.

Reading about Katherine Anne Porter's early, blown-about years in Joan Givner's deeply pleasurable critical biography, "Katherine Anne Porter: A Life" (1982), and in Darlene Harbour Unrue's dry, methodical effort, "Katherine Anne Porter: The Life of an Artist" (2005), one does not discover a life devoted to growth, let alone self-analysis or compassion for others. After her divorce, Porter supported herself by addressing envelopes for two dollars and fifty cents a day and, following a brief second marriage to one of Koontz's business associates, working as a salesclerk at Neiman Marcus. Her life style in those days reminds one of Jean Rhys's early days in London and Paris—sitting alone in her furnished rooms, a bottle on the unused writing table. Like Rhys, Porter had a habit of inviting ruin into her home so that she could flee it. But the next cataclysmic event in her life came unbidden. In November, 1915, she contracted tuberculosis. Borrowing money from her brother, she recovered for a time in Texas, where she married and divorced for the third time, then in Colorado, where her professional life as a writer began. In September, 1918, the *Rocky Mountain News* hired her as a reporter. But she collapsed again in October, nearly succumbing to Spanish influenza—an experience she used as the central event in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," the title piece of her 1939 collection of stories.

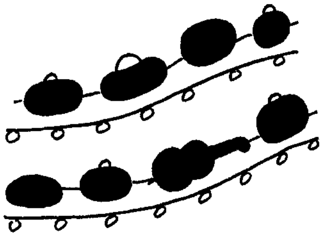
In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," the heroine, Miranda, takes ill during the flu pandemic of 1918. Living on scant wages in a boarding house, she contemplates her immediate past from her sickbed, and among the images that loom and leer in her dreams the most significant involve a horse she rode while growing up on a farm in the South—the horse, we gradually understand, symbolizes death. In the *Paris Review* interview, Porter explained that her illness had changed her forever: "It just simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered, ready. It took me a long time to go out and live in the world again. I was really 'alienated,' in the pure sense. It was, I think, the fact that I really had participated in death, that I knew what death was, and had almost experienced it. I had what the Christians call the 'beatific vision,' and the Greeks called the 'happy day,' the happy vision just before death. Now if you have had that, and survived it, come back from it, you are no longer like other people, and there's no use deceiving yourself that you are."

Although Porter saw her struggle with the flu as an important juncture in her life—her black hair famously turned silver—her biographies make it clear that her life after 1919 was pretty much a continuation of what had come before: she had countless affairs and broken engagements and married and divorced at least twice more. (The poet Allen Tate remarked, "Who knows, there might have been yet another husband dropped off somewhere." In her own defense, Porter said in a 1965 interview, "I have no *hidden* marriages. They just sort of escape my mind.") She depended on friends and publishers and institutions for financial support—and then complained whenever a piece of writing was due, blaming everyone else for her bronchitis, brought on by overwork. Too often, Porter the artist was marooned by Porter the drama queen, with her vanity, her self-centeredness, and her self-destructiveness.

Porter made her way east in 1919 and set up house in Greenwich Village, intending to write fiction and poetry, but became a publicist for a film company instead. In New York, she met Edna St. Vincent Millay and Edmund Wilson, among other bright young things. But she was more drawn to the Mexican expatriates who were part of the bohemian circle. (Porter was an early proponent of difference as the ultimate turn-on.) In 1920, she travelled south of the border, with the idea that she would support herself by writing about Mexico for American publications. Once settled there, Porter fell in love with the people and the culture. Eventually, she referred to Mexico as her second home, and she lived there on and off over the following decade, during which time she befriended the great muralist Diego Rivera. Unrue includes a range of Porter's writing about Mexico in the Library of America volume, and she has chosen well: Porter had excellent descriptive skills and a solid grounding in history. Had she come of age as a writer in the sixties, she would have made an exceptional New Journalist.

The racial lens through which Porter views Mexican life dates some of the material. In a 1924 essay, for instance, she writes, "In Mexico, most of the birds, and all of the people, sing. They sing out freely and cheerfully, to the extent of the voice Heaven has endowed them with, in all places, and at all hours." But, as far as Southern writers go, Porter was one of the more evolved. She never despised black people, for instance; back in Texas, she had empathized with their low ranking on the social ladder—it reflected her own. In 1943, she resigned from the National Institute of Arts and Letters for a time, because of its propensity for identifying potential candidates as "Negro." And in a 1942 letter to her nephew she wrote, "I think at best there is perhaps a certain tension that exists yet between even the most intelligent persons of the black and the white races in this country. There is too much evil and sad history, too many painful memories, between us. . . . But it can be overcome, outlived, not by denying the past, but by understanding it."

Mexico gave Porter the setting for her first short story, "María Concepción," which was published in 1922, when she was thirty-two. As a tale of marital jealousy and revenge, it carries the reader along, but it's a clever student's idea of a short story, not the powerful, messy work of a writer whom the page can barely contain. The same can be said of most of her first book, "Flowering Judas and Other Stories" (1930), despite the positive responses it received from other writers, including Graham Greene, who reviewed the British edition in 1936: "These seem to me the best short stories that have come out of America since the early Hemingways, and there is more promise of future life in them, the sense of a consciousness open to any wind, a style adaptable to any subject." The best moments in "Flowering Judas" occur when the narrative breaks through Porter's self-conscious craftsmanship and shows us something about the world where she was born. Unfortunately, that happens in only two stories. The first, titled "He," is the horrifying tale of a mentally challenged boy (referred to as "He" or "Him," a moniker that's clearly meant to remind us of Christ) who is exploited by his poor farm-locked family. Porter begins:



> Life was very hard for the Whipples. It was hard to feed all the hungry mouths, it was hard to keep the children in flannels during the winter, short as it was. . . .
>
> Mrs. Whipple loved her second son, the simple-minded one, better than she loved the other two children put together. She was forever saying so, and when she talked with certain of her neighbors, she would even throw in her husband and her mother for good measure. . . .
>
> This didn't keep the neighbors from talking plainly among themselves. "A Lord's pure mercy if He should die," they said. "It's the sins of the fathers," they agreed among themselves. "There's bad blood and bad doings somewhere, you can bet on that." This behind the Whipples' backs. To their faces everybody said, "He's not so bad off. He'll be all right yet. Look how He grows!"

Readers of Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor will admire the verisimilitude of Porter's Southern locutions here—"A Lord's pure mercy"—and how cleverly she skewers not only the townspeople's hypocrisy but Mrs. Whipple's as well: when it comes down to it, Mrs. Whipple is more interested in her own martyrdom than she is in her son.

Porter herself must have felt something of that boy's isolation, as a motherless child in those small, hot, poverty-stricken Texas towns. Her fear of breaking out, of being heard, also haunts "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," the other great story in "Flowering Judas." Essentially a monologue delivered by an old woman on her deathbed, it recalls Granny Weatherall's jilting by one man and her decision to settle for another. The author hovers over Granny's hallucinations, and her annoyances with her various caretakers, like a bemused spectator, ever aware of the fact that our aloneness in life becomes irrefutably clear in our dying.

Porter couldn't have written the novella "Noon Wine," the real centerpiece of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," without having first produced "He" and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." The pieces form a kind of trilogy, resistant to the sometimes overwhelming command of metaphor and style, the insistence on elegance and control, which limit the rest of Porter's work. Unlike her other stories and "Ship of Fools," these three pieces are not constricted by her fundamental fear of self-exposure—a fear that she covers with a judgmental tone that mars most of her and her characters' better impulses. "Noon Wine," a masterly tale of greed, murder, and suicide on a run-down farm in Southern Texas, is the only story in which Porter was able to fully re-create the pinched, sparse universe she grew up in. In a 1956 essay, she noted that this "short novel…exists so fully and wholly in its own right in my mind that when I attempt to trace its growth from the beginning, to follow all the clues to their sources in my memory, I am dismayed; because I am confronted with my own life, the whole society in which I was born and brought up."

Set at the close of the nineteenth century, "Noon Wine" tells the tale of Mr. Thompson, a man with a wife and two sons, who can't make a go of his dairy farm. One day, while he is sitting on his porch churning butter, a stranger ambles up to the property, asking for work. The man "spoke with some kind of foreign accent Mr. Thompson couldn't place. It wasn't Cajun and it wasn't Nigger and it wasn't Dutch, so it had him stumped." Thompson takes a chance on the foreigner, Mr. Helton, who turns out to be Swedish, and the farm's prospects change; eventually, it even shows a profit. Thompson raises Helton's wages ("The man's worth it, Ellie," he says to his wife. "He's made this place pay, and I want him to know I appreciate it"), and the family gets used to the tall Swede's silences and the sad sound of his harmonica playing that drifts from his shack after dinner.

Porter lulls us into a false sense of security as Thompson grows more confident, and more arrogant: he believes he's brilliant for having hired Helton in the first place. But just as we grow fond of these characters and their foibles another man ambles onto the property: "He wasn't exactly a fat man. He was more like a man who had been fat recently." His name is Homer T. Hatch. In a scene of gothic horror—and it's horrible because it's funny, too—Thompson and Hatch discuss tobacco and other mundane male pursuits, while Hatch gradually reveals that he's looking to arrest Helton, who is insane, and who killed his own brother with a pitchfork in North Dakota. When Hatch spies Helton, he advances toward him with a knife. In an effort to protect his friend, Thompson hits Hatch with an axe, killing him, while Helton runs off.

The story's tragedy grows and grows, spreading through the reader's mind like a fungus. After Thompson is accused and acquitted of manslaughter, he visits his neighbors to try to tell his side of the story. Begging for absolution makes him heartsick. Lying in bed after one such visit, he asks himself, "*Did he have to kill Mr. Hatch*?" The answer he comes up with is yes. The violence was always in Thompson, waiting for the right circumstance and person to attach itself to. Moving as though in a dream, Thompson goes outside, where he writes a note that says, in part, "It was Mr. Homer T. Hatch who came to do wrong to a harmless man." Then:

> He licked the point of his pencil again, and signed his full name carefully, folded the paper and put it in his outside pocket. Taking off his right shoe and sock, he set the butt of the shotgun along the ground with the twin barrels pointed towards his head. It was very awkward. He thought about this a little, leaning his head against the gun mouth. He was trembling and his head was drumming until he was deaf and blind, but he lay down flat on the earth on his side, drew the barrel under his chin and fumbled for the trigger with his great toe. That way he could work it.

This brilliant morality tale resounds through much of the Southern writing that followed. It undoubtedly had an enormous influence on Eudora Welty—especially on her stunning story, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" (1963), which was inspired by the murder of the civil-rights activist Medgar Evers. One can find elements of "Noon Wine" in O'Connor's story "The Displaced Person" (1954) and in McCullers's "Ballad of the Sad Café" (1943) as well.

In 1944, Porter published "The Leaning Tower and Other Stories," a collection that, for the most part, lacks the flashes of life that mark these three earlier stories. The title story is set in Berlin, in 1931, a year that Porter spent in that city with a man she later married, Eugene Pressly, a government official who was fourteen years her junior. The hero of "The Leaning Tower," Charles Upton, is a young

"On the other hand, my weekends are seven days long."

Texan who travels to Berlin, inspired by the memory of a German childhood friend named Kuno. As a boy, Charles was in love with Kuno's foreignness, and also envious of his class: his father was a merchant who "took his family back to Germany for a few months every two years," Porter writes. "And Kuno's postcards, with their foreign stamps, coming from far-off places like Bremen and Wiesbaden and Mannheim and Heidelberg and Berlin, had brought the great world across the sea, the blue silent deep world of Europe, straight to Charles' door." Eager to see that world for himself, Charles decamps for Berlin as a young adult. At the beginning of the story, he's walking the streets in search of a cheap pensione. At a busy intersection, he notices people looking in a shopwindow at "sausages, hams, bacon, small pink chops; all pig, real pig, fresh, smoked, salted, baked, roasted, pickled, spiced, and jellied." In another window, Porter writes, were:

> dainty artificial pigs, almond paste pigs, pink sugar chops, chocolate sausages, tiny hams, and bacons of melting cream streaked and colored to the very life. Among the tinsel and lace paper, at the back were still other kinds of pigs: plush pigs, black velvet pigs, spotted cotton pigs, metal and wooden mechanical pigs, all with frolicsome curled tails and appealing infant faces.
>
> With their nervous dogs wailing in their arms, the people, shameless mounds of fat, stood in a trance of pig worship, gazing with eyes damp with admiration and appetite . . . their late-medieval faces full of hallucinated malice and a kind of sluggish but intense cruelty that worked its way up from their depths slowly through the layers of helpless gluttonous fat.

This is a scene worthy of Fassbinder. But, despite its descriptive power, the condemnation of between-the-wars Germany, and Germans, gives the story the feeling of journalism rather than of literature; it is a travelogue with no room for the moral ambiguity of life.

By the time Porter published "The Leaning Tower," she had become something of a legend. "She was always spoken of simply as 'Katherine Anne,' and whether one was actually acquainted with her or not," Hardwick writes. "Everyone who cared about writing knew and admired her work. . . . And if at the height of her fame and for her longest story 'The Leaning Tower' Miss Porter came out with $300—well, that was her career." Not every critic had unqualified admiration for Porter, though. Edmund Wilson, reviewing "The Leaning Tower" in this magazine, wrote, "Miss Porter is baffling because one cannot take hold of her work in any of the obvious ways. . . . If [the reviewer] is tempted to say that the effect is pale, he is prevented by the realization that Miss Porter writes English of a purity and precision almost unique in contemporary American fiction. If he tries to demur that some given piece fails to mount with the accelerating pace or arrive at the final intensity that he is in the habit of expecting in short stories, he is deterred by a nibbling suspicion that he may not have grasped its meaning."

It's true that it's almost impossible to get a toehold on much of Porter's later work, owing to its high varnish: her characters can barely breathe beneath the sheen. Porter perfected her stories until you begin to feel like a clumsy intruder for even reading them. Rarely do you get beneath the decorous surface and feel a character's lifeblood. And it is this artificiality that kept Porter on the wrong side of the line that separates a minor writer from a great one. Ultimately, she controlled too much: she relied on tricks of style, on a language that was too cultivated for the rough potential of stories like "He" and "Noon Wine" to develop. Too often one senses Porter repressing the trashy twang of her childhood in favor of something more, as Capote put it, "enameled."

Porter did not publish another book until "Ship of Fools," eighteen years after "The Leaning Tower." Soon after that, the school of Southern writing that she had helped to forge was gone—O'Connor died in 1964, McCullers in 1967. But Porter had turned her back on her rural roots some time earlier. After "Noon Wine," she didn't revisit Texas—the violence of a male-centered world—in any significant way. Self-promotion came first; her fiction second. (She liked to quote Madame Du Barry, who said, "My life has been incredible. I don't believe a word of it!") By the time she died, in 1980, the star had suffocated the writer, who simply couldn't bear to take advantage of what empowered her as an artist: her lower-class origins. When "Ship of Fools" made her a wealthy woman at last, she bought an emerald ring that she had long coveted. Perhaps the shine of that stone finally eclipsed the too glaring days of her long past. ♦

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BOOKS

FROM VENICE TO VARANASI

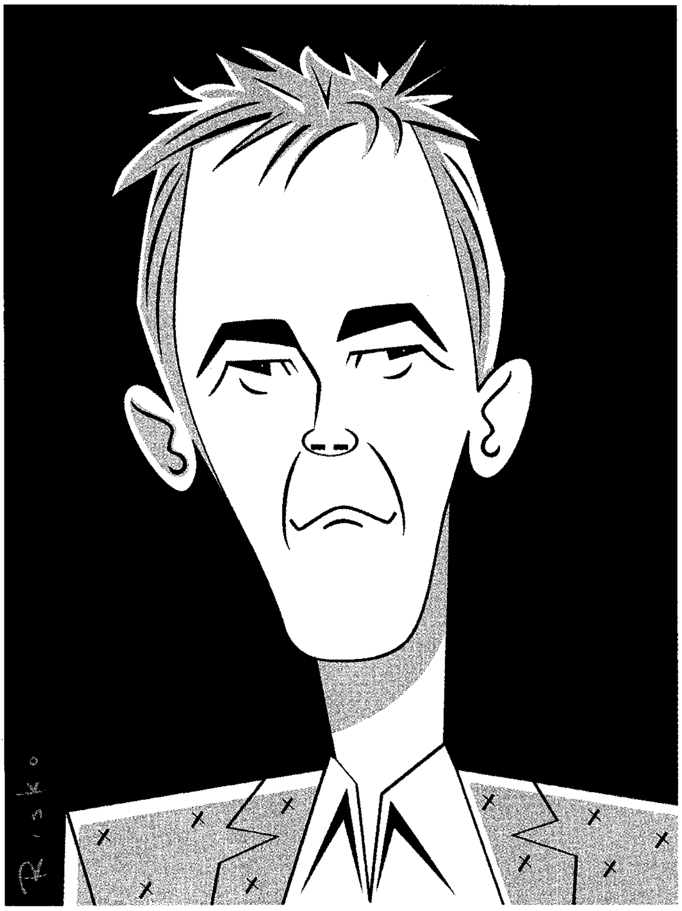
Geoff Dyer's wandering eye.

BY JAMES WOOD

Walter Benjamin once said that every great work dissolves a genre or founds a new one. But is it only masterpieces that have a monopoly on novelty? What if a writer had written several works that rose to Benjamin's high definition, not all great, perhaps, but so different from one another, so peculiar to their author, and so inimitable that each founded its own, immediately self-dissolving genre? The English writer Geoff Dyer delights in producing books that are unique, like keys. There is nothing anywhere like Dyer's semi-fictional rhapsody about jazz, "But Beautiful," or his book about the First World War, "The Missing of the Somme," or his autobiographical essay about D. H. Lawrence, "Out of Sheer Rage," or his essayistic travelogue "Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It." You can spot Dyer's antecedents and influences—Nietzsche, Roland Barthes, Thomas Bernhard, Milan Kundera, John Berger, Martin Amis—but not his literary children, because his work is so restlessly various that it moves somewhere else before it can gather a family. He combines fiction, autobiography, travel writing, cultural criticism, literary theory, and a kind of comic English whining. The result ought to be a mutant mulch but is almost always a louche and canny delight.

Dyer's sixth book, "Out of Sheer Rage" (1997), established the characteristic voice of his recent work—a loitering investigation, somehow intense and slackerish, the author not quite pursuing his subject but hanging around it, like a clever aimless boy on a street corner. Dyer had wanted to write a critical book about D. H. Lawrence, but whenever he tried to begin he found something to distract him. First, it was his idea of writing a novel:

> Although I had made up my mind to write a book about Lawrence I had also made up my mind to write a novel, and while the decision to write the book about Lawrence was made later it had not entirely superseded that earlier decision. At first I'd had an overwhelming urge to write both books but these two desires had worn each other down to the point where I had no urge to write either.



Dyer is a Romantic flâneur, eager to live, wary of writing.

Then, there was the question of where to write—or, rather, fail to write—the book on Lawrence: "One of the reasons, in fact, that it was impossible to get started on either the Lawrence book or the novel was because I was so preoccupied with where to live. I could live anywhere, all I had to do was choose—but it was impossible to choose because I could live anywhere." Dyer goes to Rome, where his girlfriend lives, but it is too hot in Rome to do any work, and the couple abscond to a Greek island. But it is no better there. He gets distracted by reading Rilke, which at first excites him, but then even reading Rilke is too much: "I had thought that after working on my book about Lawrence in the mornings I would spend the afternoons playing tennis but there were no courts and so, having spent the mornings not writing my book about Lawrence and not reading Rilke, I spent the afternoons not playing tennis." Readers of Thomas Bernhard will recognize a familiar vaudeville of despair, whereby every possibility is shadowed by its negation, and nothing can ever be completed, because it is always being ceaselessly re-started.

Bernhard is very funny, but despair—particularly the menace of suicide and breakdown—is always present. Dyer is more deliberately funny, and lighter, and "Out of Sheer Rage" represented a seemingly impossible Englishing of the Austrian writer. Like Dyer's later books—"Paris Trance" (1998), a novel about two twenty-something Brits who can't get anything serious done in Paris (one of them has come to Paris expressly to write his novel, of course), and "Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It" (2003), a series of essays set in Thailand, France, Libya, Italy—"Out of Sheer Rage" is a work of delicious, stunned truancy. For Bernhard, it is obsessive mental activity that obstructs work; for Dyer's characters, it is the negative liberty of boredom. It's always easier not to be writing than to be writing, and at least by not writing one is keeping alive the option of at

ROBERT RISKO

some point writing again. But, as soon as one is doing absolutely nothing, the intolerability strikes one as being not so much a freedom as a prison, walled on every side by limitless possibility—"It was impossible to choose because I could live anywhere." In Dyer's ruefully self-cancelling world, even inactivity is a kind of activity, and life becomes a form of "yoga for people who can't be bothered to do it." In Rome (the "Yoga" book has several funny essays set there), or in Paris, or anywhere, really, life dwindles to stasis: "There was less and less to do, which was just as well because I had less and less energy to do anything."

On the one hand, Dyer's work of the past decade seems familiarly postmodern. Grand gestures are futile, and in place of hard work or exacting thought there is sex and drugs and clubbing, and various kinds of mind-bending music. Everything is unfinishable, belated, and philosophically twilit. The Owl of Minerva can barely crank its wings open—no doubt because it has become a fat urban pigeon, toddling between cafés for cultural leftovers. The books turn themselves inside out, like the Pompidou Center, displaying their inner workings. The book about Lawrence becomes a book about failing to write about Lawrence; a projected work about the ruins of antiquity (mentioned in "Yoga") gets nowhere—"Such a book would one day lie in ruins about me." But, of course, Dyer's books do get written: interesting books about boredom, successful books about failure, complete books about incompletion. And one can see that, far from enacting an easy ironic resignation, Dyer is really a late Romantic, a flâneur out of Rilke (but with a vinegary English dash of Kingsley Amis), eager to experience as much as possible, to travel and fall in love and meet new people, and wary of writing and reading, because, although they preserve such experience, they do so at a mimetic remove. The problem for the Romantic is that, in order to have anything to write about, he has to live—i.e., not be writing. Not for nothing is D. H. Lawrence, the savage pilgrim, Dyer's great model.

So Dyer has spent much of his life on the move—London, Paris, Rome, Oxford, New Orleans, New York—and much of his best writing has been prompted by travel. He approaches this humorously in "Out of Sheer Rage," but the English larkiness cannot obscure the intensity of the feeling. Once, he writes there, he found himself walking on a North London street, the road where Julian Barnes lived: "I didn't see him but I knew that in one of these large, comfortable houses Julian Barnes was sitting at his desk, working, as he did every day. It seemed an intolerable waste of a life, *of a writer's life especially,* to sit at a desk in this nice, dull street in north London. It seemed, curiously, a betrayal of the idea of the writer." To spend one's life writing is a betrayal of the writer's life: Dyer knows this is a lunatic paradox, that even Romantics have to sit at boring desks and write, but he would rather have his battered paradox than Barnes's clean coherence.

And so he gets up from the desk and gets on a plane or a boat. He approvingly quotes Rebecca West on how Lawrence would arrive in a place—Florence, say—and immediately start writing about it, even if he knew little about it: "He was writing about the state of his own soul at that moment, which . . . he could render only in symbolic terms; and the city of Florence was as good a symbol as any other." Dyer's latest book, the impishly titled "Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi" (Pantheon; $24), describes itself as a novel but is two long stories, one set in Venice and one in the holy Indian city of Varanasi (also known as Benares or Kashi), on the Ganges. These stories have certain fictive connections, and the protagonist of each—a middle-aged English journalist, sent to one of the cities on assignment—is not identical to Geoff Dyer. Geoff is not Jeff. Still, the stories seem to flit in and out of fictionality, in a way that seems intended; they are a Dyer-like combination of essay, travelogue, and invention, and the veronica of the author's soul can be glimpsed behind the two texts. (A note informs us that the author has been to Varanasi, and to three Biennales.)

The character at the center of "Jeff in Venice" is Jeff Atman, a London journalist who covers the art world. He hates his work, and indulges in bitter procrastination: "Back home, back at his desk, the perennial question kept cropping up: how much longer could he keep doing this stuff for? For about two minutes at a time, it turned out, but eventually these two minute increments—punctuated by emails pinging in and out—mounted up. God, what a miserable way to earn a living." He goes to Venice to write about the Biennale, and thus begins a relentlessly funny reply to Thomas Mann's famous novella. Like Mann's austere hero, the distinguished writer Gustav von Aschenbach, the very undistinguished Jeff, who at forty-five is going gray, gets his hair dyed black. Like Aschenbach, Jeff Atman (the surname is a Hindu term for "soul" or "self," but also hovers close to art man, adman, and T. Mann) spies a love object in Venice—in his case, not an ethereal boy but a beautiful and sexy American named Laura, with a dolphin tattooed on her hipbone. The two get together, have a lot of sex, and snort quantities of coke.

Mann's august Apollonianism is cynically subverted at every turn of Dyer's story. Venice is a simulacrum of itself, no more than a very large art installation: "Every day, for hundreds of years, Venice had woken up and put on this guise of being a real place even though everyone knew it existed only for tourists." The gangs of art critics, artists, and hangers-on have arrived in a bacchanalian spirit: "You came to Venice, you saw a ton of art, you went to parties, you drank up a storm, you talked bollocks for hours on end and went back to London with a cumulative hangover, liver damage, a notebook almost devoid of notes and the first tingle of a cold sore." Maybe the parties themselves are a kind of installation: "Ben said he had it on good authority that later this afternoon, at the Venezuelan pavilion, chocolate-covered cockroaches would be served." Jeff reflects, "The perfect installation would be a nightclub, full of people, pumping music, lights, smoke machine and maybe drugs thrown in. You could call it Nightclub, and if you kept it going twenty-four hours a day it would be the big hit of the Biennale."

Essentially, the running joke of "Jeff in Venice" is: What would have happened if Aschenbach had got hold of young Tadzio and had his Dionysian way with him? Wouldn't sex then have triumphed over death? (Mann's novella ends with Tadzio seeming to beckon the aging lecher, who rises from his deck chair, collapses back into it, and dies: he literally can't get it up.) The cynicism of Dyer's story would be insupportable if it were not savagely funny, and if there were not Mann's closeted idealism to play off. This, Dyer seems to say, is what we have come to, in the near-century since the earlier novella—"when it was impossible to believe that there would come a time when all people cared about was free risotto to mop up all the free bellinis they'd been swilling in the garden."

The moral emptiness of "Jeff in Venice" seems all the more devastating when put into relief by its companion, "Death in Varanasi." The first story is a flowing tide of sex and carnality; the second is dominated by a holy river of life and death, the Ganges. The first gluts itself on fleshly pleasures; the second empties itself of those temptations (there is no sex, and little drinking, though there is a bit of drug-taking). The tale is narrated by a nameless middle-aged journalist, who may or may not be Jeff Atman (or Geoff Dyer, for that matter), and who has come to Varanasi, one of the holiest sites of Hindu pilgrimage, to write a piece for a London newspaper. There are links with the book's Venice story, and with Thomas Mann's Venice story. Hindus believe that if you die and are cremated in Varanasi, then you may be absolved of the burden of samsara, or reincarnation. So Varanasi, in one guise, is a kind of sublime crematorium, and the Ganges is nearly clogged with the ash of corpses. Aschenbach means, literally, "ash brook." As in Venice, the protagonist is a spectatorial tourist. He lands in town and immediately sets out for the burning river: "That's where I was hurrying, to see bodies being burned. (On arriving in a new place, it's no bad thing to simply do what everyone else does.)" He tries to read up on Hinduism, but can't make head or tail of it. He is taken, however, with the concept of "darshan"—the idea that "the more attention paid to a god, the more it was looked at, the greater its power, the more easily it could be seen." Dyer doesn't need to make explicit the connection with Atman's lust for Laura and Aschenbach's gazing on the godlike Tadzio. And, as in Venice, almost anything can seem like an art installation, even a pile of garbage seen from a rickshaw:

> A couple of happy-looking pigs were rooting through a mass of garbage. Some of this rubbish had been compacted down into a dark tar, a sediment of concentrated filth, pure filth, filth with no impurities, devoid of everything that was not filth. . . . On top of this was an assortment of browning marigolds, bits of soggy cardboard (not automatically to be discounted as a calorific source) and freshish-looking excrement (ditto). The whole thing was set off with a resilient garnish of blue plastic bags. In its way it was a potential tourist attraction, a contemporary manifestation of the classical ideal of squalor. I was quite excited by it, was tempted to ask the driver to stop so that I could have a better look, perhaps even take a picture.

Where Venice provokes Atman's coarse rebellion, Varanasi goads Dyer's deep descriptive talents. There are wonderful observations, pungent and funny. A holy man with a beard "that looked like it was made out of the fur of a long-haired animal, mythical in origin, close to extinction and completely incontinent." Women "in red and yellow saris flickered by like load-bearing flames." In a very amusing scene, the narrator walks down a narrow lane while a cow pushes past him. The cow's tail "was as drenched in shit as an artist's brush in paint. But just because I was me with a nice clean bottom and she was a cow with an ass caked in shit did not mean that I had not been her—or she me—in a previous existence. We could trade places in an instant. The value of your shares in the great Samsara-NASDAQ can go up as well as down." As if thinking the same thought, the cow flicks the narrator in the mouth with her shit-caked tail.

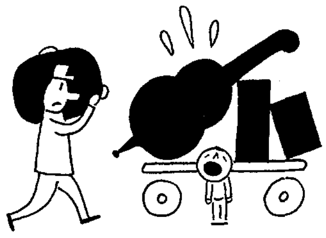
Against the odds, and against the drift of the Venice story, Varanasi has a great impact on the English journalist. Originally booked for five nights there, he moves to a hotel overlooking the Ganges and stays for weeks. Time melts away. He loses his passport. He gets his head and eyebrows shaved, like an Indian mourner, and starts wearing a dhoti. He swims in the ashy Ganges. Earlier, he had seen a dog so covered with welts and sores that it could only scratch itself all day—"the awful Samsara of itching and scratching, itching and scratching." The reader cannot help but think of "Jeff in Venice," a tale of compulsive scratching and itching. At the end of "Death in Varanasi," the narrator seems to find a religious peace from all that scratching and itching: "I didn't renounce the world; I just became gradually less interested in certain aspects of it, less involved with it."

This religious self-emptying might seem an unexpected turn in Dyer's usually hilarious and worldly work. But in fact the metaphysics of boredom lead naturally to the metaphysics of shanti. In the earlier books, Dyer's characters failed to write not because they were indifferent to writing but because they wanted too much to write. Negative liberty expresses a fear of completion; if you never start a work, then at least there is no chance of your having finished it. To complete something is in some ways to make it disappear; not starting it is a preëmptive strike against loss, a way of elegizing what has not yet disappeared. (Tellingly, Dyer has been repeatedly drawn to writing about epitaphs—ruins, cemeteries, and photographs, which are epitaphs of a frozen moment.) Time is what completes us, and time is what forces us into the endless repetition that is boredom and the tyranny of habit. Travel, sex, and drugs—Dyer's recurrent interests—are ways to cheat time, are moments out of time. "For a few minutes anything seemed possible," Dyer writes of getting stoned in Rome. Getting high, Jeff Atman thinks, was "like a concentrated version of everything he had ever wanted from life." Getting high might be seen as a maximization of negative liberty, where everything really can be pure potential. The philosopher and aphorist E. M. Cioran writes, "Boredom, with a bad reputation for frivolity, nonetheless allows us to glimpse the abyss from which issues the need for prayer." That is where, in this original, affecting, and unexpected book, Geoff Dyer leaves his narrator: prayerfully bottoming out on boredom. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

It Will Come to Me, *by Emily Fox Gordon (Spiegel & Grau; $24.95).* In this campus satire, Ben and Ruth Blau have settled into what appears to be a comfortable routine at their Southern university campus. Ruth, mourning her inability to follow up on an acclaimed early trilogy of novels, drinks a little too much; Ben, working on a manuscript about altruism, shirks bureaucratic duties in the philosophy department. Their lives are disrupted by two arrivals: a new president determined to shake up the staid faculty habits and a popular memoirist and self-help author who prods Ruth to begin writing again. Gordon's début novel aims at predictable targets: departmental politics, obscure academic fields, self-righteousness, and élitism. Her comedy is deft, but the plot seems contrived, particularly when the story of the Blaus' wayward son draws things to a falsely redemptive close.

One D.O.A. One on the Way, *by Mary Robison (Counterpoint; $23).* Robison could work for a food or drug packager: she squeezes dire warnings into tiny spaces. Her new novel, at a hundred and sixty-six pages, broken into two hundred and twenty-five numbered chapters, recounts an unkempt marriage between Eve, a movie location scout, and the dying Adam; her ongoing affair with Adam's twin brother, Saunders; her concerns for a mental-patient in-law, Petal; and car trips with a doltish intern-colleague, Lucien. And then there are lists, quoting gun-holster catalogues, private promises ("I'm never again wearing anything bought at Lowe's"), and late news about post-Katrina New Orleans ("The rate of Armed Robbery is up 1,022 percent"), where all this is coming down. The book can be read in half an afternoon, leaving plenty of room for afterthoughts about Robison's funny and heartbreaking conversations, which run short because both sides can barely contain their impatience or intelligence or high (both ways) private style.



Tall Man, *by Chloe Hooper (Scribner; $24).* In 2004, in a remote Aboriginal community in northern Australia, Cameron Doomadgee, a drunk young indigenous man, was arrested and, a few hours later, died in his prison cell. A witness claimed that the six-foot-seven-inch arresting officer beat Doomadgee to death. The officer claimed that Doomadgee fell accidentally and that the extent of his injuries (which included broken ribs and a ruptured liver) wasn't apparent. Through the story of the manslaughter trial, Hooper lays bare Australia's institutional racism and the grim conditions of Aboriginal life there. A novelist, she finds a muscular music even when confronting sordid truths. Describing a desolate indigenous settlement, she recalls Aboriginal myth: "beer cans lay by the river's edge, their red-and-green aluminum shimmering in the sun; a nightmare incarnation of the Rainbow Serpent."

Birdscapes, *by Jeremy Mynott (Princeton; $29.95).* Who watches the bird-watchers? This inventive disquisition is alert to both the dawn chorus of birds and the great choir of poets, travellers, and naturalists who have rhapsodized them. Central to the book is the ambiguity of the word "identify": on one level, the drive to identify and list birds forms the core of bird-watching; on another, there is the "impulse to identify with the creature hunted, pursued, loved or studied." The latter trait orients the most sensitive souls—such as poets, naturalists, and soothsayers, who used bird flights as a divination tool—to the skies and the seasons. For Mynott, much of the appeal of birds stems from the inexhaustible variety of our response to them: he celebrates the fact that, contra Keats, the nightingale's song might not have the same meanings for the modern birder as it has for Ruth among the alien corn.

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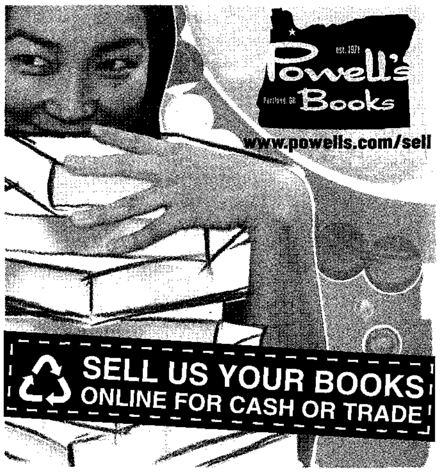

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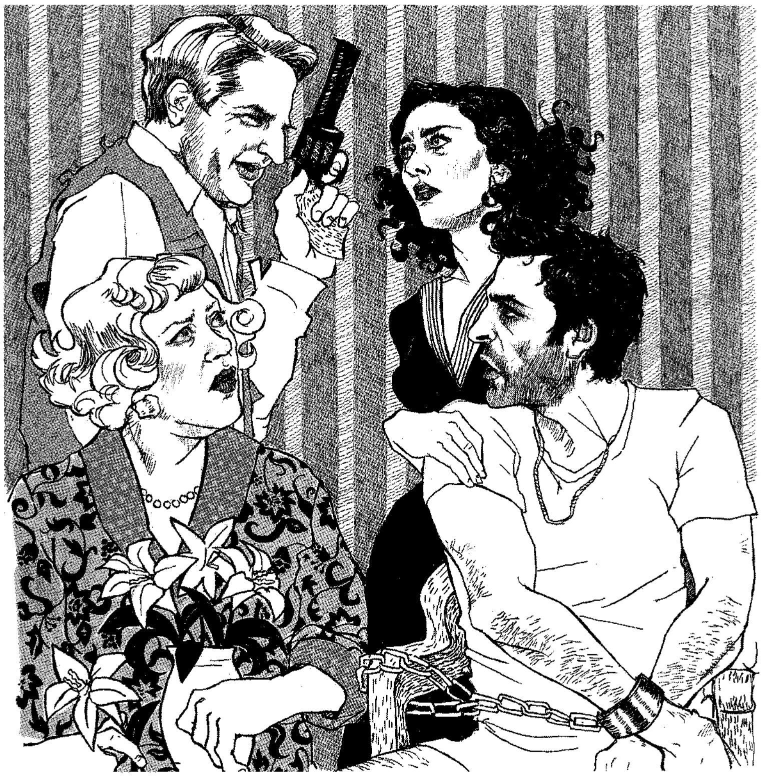
THE THEATRE

CLOWNS OF CATASTROPHE

Two shows pit silliness against suffering.

BY JOHN LAHR



Ménage à quatre: Poe, Benanti, Arison, and Nielsen in Christopher Durang's new play.

HOPE GANGLOFF

I have seen actors walk off the set. I have seen audiences walk out of the theatre. But not until Christopher Durang's "Why Torture Is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them" (at the Public) have I seen a playwright walk out on his own play. "I don't like this. I don't like what's happened," the ingénue Felicity (Laura Benanti) says, near the finale, having spent most of the evening desperately trying to enlist the help of her reactionary parents in getting an annulment of her marriage to Zamir (Amir Arison), a Middle Eastern stranger whom she married after a drunken one-night stand, and whom she thinks might be a terrorist. "There's no way I can imagine a positive outcome from this. I don't want to be part of it," Felicity adds, and we feel her pain.

The problem here is that Durang can't decide whether he's writing a satire or a sitcom. He has erected a farcical house of cards that can't stand up. There's a mad mother downstairs, and a pistol-packing father upstairs, practicing a little extraordinary rendition of his own. There's blood and body parts. There are sight gags and wacky vigilantes. There's even a minister with a sideline in pornography ("a porn-again Christian"). The director, Nicholas Martin, who knows his way around comedy and has worked with Durang before, seems unwilling or unable to restrain the author from behaving like the school cutup who thinks he's the smartest kid in the class. Martin gives the production a bright look and a perky tempo, but the crispness of the staging only underscores the laziness of the writing. At one point, Zamir asks to meet Felicity's parents. "How about never? Is never good for you?" she answers, a line purloined from Robert Mankoff's well-known *New Yorker* cartoon.

As a satirist, Durang doesn't have the renegade chops; as a comedian, he doesn't know quite where to take aim. He wants to tee off on torture, right-wing paranoia, and conservative fear-mongering, but in humor, as in golf, the follow-through is as important as the swing, and Durang can't get any distance with his potshots. "John Yoo from the Justice Department wrote a torture memo that says that it isn't torture unless it causes organ failure," Felicity's father, Leonard (Richard Poe), says, just before he manacles Zamir to a chair in his upstairs armory. "And even if it does that, as long as the President says the words 'war on terror,' it's A-O.K." The line has no spin, no payoff, no news. Four years ago, before the Obama Presidency, the joke might have been provocative; now it seems as fresh as beef jerky.

Durang lacks the skill to carry his political outrage to a conclusion that is appropriately vicious and vivacious. He writes himself into a narrative and emotional impasse, from which retreat is the only option. So, at the eleventh hour—or so it seems—Durang rewinds the plot that he has never mastered, imposes new rules on a game he refuses to play, and, instead of pursuing the grotesque, goes for giggles. The evening ends with the cast foxtrotting to the thirties anthem "Dancing in the Dark": an ironic image that is supposed to play as a statement about a blinkered Republican America but that says more about the beleaguered playwright, who wants to have his cake and not eat it, too.

The evening's one consistent delight is Kristine Nielsen, who plays Luella, Felicity's dithering, theatre-obsessed, put-upon mother, and whose mugging steals what there is of the show. With her pearl choker and her tweedy, ample frame, Nielsen looks like she just stepped out of a Helen Hokinson cartoon. Blond bangs and high cheekbones set off her big almond eyes, which seem constantly to wander toward a reality that only she can see. "You know, darling, I don't like to discuss what happens at night," she says, about her conjugal life. "That's private, and it's unspeakable." She adds, "I don't even talk about it to myself." Nielsen invests Luella with a sort of baffled alertness. "Your father is pro-life, did you know that?" she tells Felicity, at one point, adding, in fluting tones, “He loves all those stem-cell things. . . . Wants to give them the right to vote, just about. . . . Wants to register them as Republicans.” Durang has used Nielsen in other plays; he knows how to pitch his lines to her particular comic strength—Luella is a bundle of wild eccentricity trying vainly to wrestle itself into conventional form. “You know, I don’t really know what normal is,” she says. “That’s one of the reasons I go to theatre.” In one of her zany digressions, Luella asks Felicity what plays she has seen. “I’ve seen a hundred plays by Martin McDonagh, I’ve seen two hundred plays by David Hare, and three hundred plays each by Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourn and Michael Frayn,” Felicity replies. “Are Americans not writing plays anymore?” Luella asks. It’s a question better put to the author.

If you want to get high on the fumes of desolation—the giddy, furtive, theatrical equivalent of sniffing glue—then “The Toxic Avenger” (well directed by John Rando, at New World Stages) is probably goofy enough to get you there. With a book and lyrics by Joe DiPietro and music and lyrics by David Bryan (based on Lloyd Kaufman’s 1984 film of the same name), the show opens with gleeful bad tidings of the horror to come: the news is so traumatic, we are told, that a registered nurse is stationed in the lobby; what’s more, the audience is urged, “For the love of God, do *not* turn off your cell phones.” New Jersey, it seems, is choking to death, and only one man—Melvin Ferd the Third (Nick Cordero)—can save it from political corruption and environmental disaster. Set amid the ugly clutter of oil drums and the haze of industrial smog—the first number begins with a cough—“The Toxic Avenger” gives nihilism a good night out. In a delirium of decay, the show checks every box on the barbarity short list: Murder, Mutants, Disembowelling, Severed Limbs, Rape, Transvestism, Police and Political Corruption, Oprah. You want it, you got it! And, of course, the list wouldn’t be complete without Mocking a Handicap. The love interest here is a blind librarian called Sarah (Sara Chase), who can’t see how many blind jokes the musical makes at her expense. (Twenty-three is the charm.) Hey, it’s a cruel, cruel world even in adolescent-musical land.

The songs set the acrylic tone: “Thank God She’s Blind,” “Evil Is Hot,” “Bitch/Slut/Liar/Whore,” “Choose Me, Oprah,” and, my favorite, “Hot Toxic Love,” during which Sarah tries to throw herself into the arms of the buff, green Melvin Ferd—he’s been dumped into industrial waste by the mayor’s thugs and transformed from geek to freak—and misses her slimy beloved by a mile, continuing the song in the wings. (Stephen Sondheim, eat your sour heart out!) Let the record show that DiPietro and Bryan manage to rhyme “macho” with “gazpacho.” The fun they had writing the score certainly communicates itself. In “Who Will Save New Jersey?,” for instance, Melvin and a passing nun (natch) give New York City a pimp-slapping:

> Now listen up, Manhattan—
> We know you’re stinkin’ rich!
> Your bedsheets may be satin
> But Jersey’s not your bitch!

DiPietro and Bryan are equal-opportunity offenders. In “The Legend of the Toxic Avenger,” they send up both New Jersey’s Bruce Springsteen and their own ludicrous plot:

> Lemme tell ya a story ’bout
> A man with a strange complexion.
> He killed a lotta folks
> And made a love connection.

Under Rando’s direction, “The Toxic Avenger” is a sort of one-stop shop for every piece of vaudeville shtick. Nancy Opel, who plays more characters in this show than Roseanne has personalities, has a field day with a hilarious quick-change routine. And the hardworking, talented ensemble, including Demond Green and Matthew Saldivar, have the audience whooping it up as they whirl in drag behind Opel, like Tina Turner and the Ikettes. In fact, the show is really a kind of St. Vitus’ dance, a manifestation of our culture’s death-haunted hysteria. It registers the fury of helplessness and offers in response only the impotence of invective. At the finale, the new governor of New Jersey, Ferd the Third, stands before us, with his blind wife and his green baby, and sings:

> *The first bill that I plan to pass—*
> *Pollute the earth and I’ll kick your ass!*

On the way out, I noticed people selling T-shirts that read “Totally Toxic.” My guess is that that will be the title of the sequel. ♦

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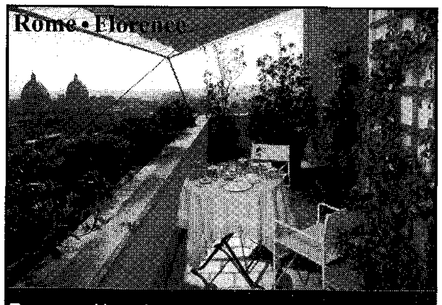

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THE ART WORLD

THEIR GENERATION

"Younger Than Jesus" at the New Museum.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

How will upcoming artists respond to the down-going economy? They will make a point of entertaining themselves on the cheap, often in groups, and self-consciously, as members of an ingenuity- and drollery-loving generation that was weaned on the Internet and is game for the bust of the boom in which it was reared. So testifies "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus," the New Museum's arduously titled, newly instituted triennial, which presents work by fifty artists, from twenty-five countries, who have yet to blow out thirty-three candles on a birthday cake. The show is low-budget bubbly fun, for the most part—and noisy, what with all the videos and sound pieces. Its star, for me, is Ryan Trecartin, an American artist based in Philadelphia, who orchestrates a shaggy installation in which scripted, digitally eventful videos (catchable on YouTube) feature madcap, often sexually ambiguous performers enacting phantasmagorical dramas in squeaky voices at very high speed. The plot, if it can be called that, of one video concerns quadruplet girls whose father has told them that he wanted only triplets; two of the sisters resolve the familial anxiety by merging into one. Another winner is a Frenchman, Cyprien Gaillard, with a spectacular video, accompanied by a soundtrack of ghostly anthems, of brutalist apartment blocks in Ukraine (aerial views), Russia (the scene of a gang fight involving hundreds of young men), and France (a building at night spewing a lovely fireworks display before imploding—the occasion is a planned demolition, it turns out—in clouds of dust pierced by searchlights). One probably could tease political implications from Gaillard's architectural travelogue, but its pith, in the context of the show, is sheer youthful alacrity. What is being done in new art? Whatever the hell anybody feels like doing.

Unsurprisingly, "Younger Than Jesus" has dicey aspects. Start with the idea of sorting artists by age. One of the show's crew of staff curators, Laura Hoptman—writing in a catalogue packed with sociological essays, including charts of trends in substance abuse and sexual behavior—admits that generational analysis is akin to reading horoscopes, which are "suspiciously nonspecific, although we long for them not to be." In the abstract, every new generation is pretty much like the one that came before it: struggling Oedipally with its forebears, embracing the Zeitgeist, and otherwise reactivating stock patterns, meanwhile being fawned upon by marketers. If there is anything unique about today's young, it may be a precocious alertness to how such rhetorical typecasting and economic targeting work. This generation even usurps the process, by innumerable online means. Gone are the days, in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when deconstruction-smitten academics and artists toiled to share their discovery that media and institutions are—get ready—manipulative. Viscerally sophisticated young artists are more interested in playing with materials and contexts that are purely gratuitous, or, at least, too anarchic or too desultory to be marshalled for or against any commercial interest or political tendency. It's a timely shift, given that, this year, sales of almost everything, very much including art, are down, and that, last year, theoretical politics were obliterated by the real thing. The only sorting system for artists that matters—according to individual quality and influence—will prevail, in time, over fashion. Not that there's anything wrong with fashion. Novelty keeps us spry, and it cleans up after itself by being gone in a minute.

For a sense of how fast and erratically the current art culture is moving, consider that just last summer the New Museum mounted another international roundup, "After Nature," selected by one of the "Jesus" curators, Massimiliano Gioni, which heralded a revival of humanist sentiment and existential anguish, notably in figurative sculpture and staged photography. We were led to expect a darkly serious trend in art. What happened to that? Partly, the contrast involves mere repackaging. Gaillard's imploding building, a whoop in its present company, would likely have seemed apocalyptic in proximity to a film in the earlier show, by Werner Herzog, of burning Kuwaiti oil wells. But the museum's side step to upbeat theatricality doesn't feel arbitrary. It is at one with the distinctly fresh attitude of much of the work on view, which may be regarded as either laudably nimble or deplorably spineless. Remember Gilda Radner's character Emily Litella, on the old "Saturday Night Live," who chirped "Never mind!" when misunderstandings that had sparked her angry rants were pointed out to her? Thinking of that joke helped me focus on a quality of whipsaw humor that is rife in "Jesus." Call it "never-mindedness," a sort of booby-trapped cocksureness, foreseen by Nirvana. In Trecartin's work, soulful sincerity may own up at a moment's notice to being bedevilled nihilism, or just a manic hedge against boredom. The different tones flicker rather than blur. All are in force, all at once. You wouldn't think that a state of mind so self-sabotaging is sustainable, short of clinical insanity. But there it is, brightly and breezily.

Apropos of insanity, a video by the Scotsman Luke Fowler, one of several "Jesus" works that channel nostalgia for radical art and culture of the past, incorporates documentary footage from the psychiatrist R. D. Laing's notorious Kingsley Hall, a therapeutic community that he operated in East London from 1965 to 1970. Laing treated schizophrenics by encouraging them to develop, rather than suppress, the cracked logic of their thoughts. One may reject the notion that madness is somehow liberating (I do), but it's a fact of experience, familiar from Outsider art, that painful dissociation can produce impressions of aesthetic cogency. Fowler has fashioned a fugue of linguistic non sequiturs that weave an unsettling spell. Another video montage, by Tigran Khachatryan, an Armenian, intercuts rushing crowd scenes from classic Soviet films by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov with news coverage of political riots and shots of contemporary skateboarders and other incautious youths engaging in "Jackass"-style, at times plainly bone-breaking behavior. It ends with a young man, naked, masturbating to orgasm while maintaining a facial expression of unruffled calm. The shock of ultimate excitement coextensive with disinterested detachment is never-mindedness in spades.

A still from the video "Re'Search Wait'S" (2009), by Ryan Trecartin, an artist based in Philadelphia.

COURTESY RYAN TRECARTIN/ELIZABETH DEE, NY

So far, I've mentioned only works in video, for a compelling reason—video is by far the predominant medium of adventurous young artists today. There are a few paintings on hand in the show; the best are by a Pole, Jakub Julian Ziolkowski, whose surrealistic imagination and formal inventiveness invite, and actually survive, comparison to Picasso. "The Great Battle Under the Table," a summary in minuscule detail of the Napoleonic wars, teeters on the verge of mere comic illustration, but there is a demonic oomph about it—endorsed by neighboring pictures, evocative of Francis Bacon and Philip Guston—that postpones judgment. The show offers photographs, too, in social-documentary and conceptual veins—the most impressive are staged street scenes, in woebegone Paris suburbs, by the Algerian Mohamed Bourouissa—and some sculpture of the jury-rigged-junk variety that the New Museum celebrated in its inaugural exhibition, "Unmonumental," in 2007. But, four decades after the first portable videotape recorder became available, video has become a studio tool that's as second nature as pencils. Little by little, it has stolen fire from film, photography, theatre, concert performance, painting (with projections as murals), drawing (with animation), and, of course, television, exhaustively unpacking the history and the semiotics of the home screen. Video's only weakness has been commercial, as a product hard to commodify. But that handicap may be barely noticeable in the present art market.

One other work must be noted: a book, "Younger Than Jesus: Artist Directory," edited by the show's curators, and published by the New Museum and Phaidon Press. Artists in the show, and about four hundred and fifty others who didn't make the cut, each get a page of reproductions and description. All were recommended by an advisory cohort of roughly a hundred and fifty curators, critics, and artists from around the world. Phone-book bulky, the tome is an instant memorial to today's international art network. In coming years, it will likely serve curators, dealers, and collectors as a Sears catalogue of inexorably older-than-Jesus talent. There's something sickening about the scale of the art-mediating infrastructure that the book represents, advertising more stuff than one might ever get around to looking at, let alone valuing. Out there in the night, while we sleep, incredible quantities of art are being carted around, archived, and so on, because it is somebody's job to do those things. Can we please not think about that? ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Lancaster (N.H.) Coös County Democrat.

On Oct. 12, State Police responded to a report of a theft of three quilts from a motel in Jefferson. The quilts were later found to have been folded and put in the closet by the tourists.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

ROCK SOLID

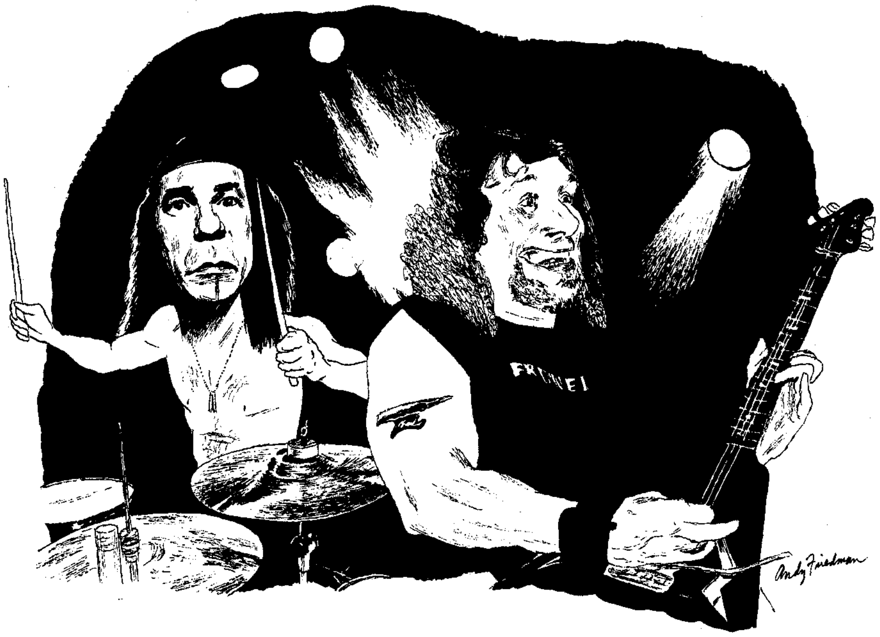
"Anvil! The Story of Anvil."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The most stirring release of the year thus far is a documentary. No surprise in that, given the current state of feature films, or in the fact that "Anvil! The Story of Anvil" is a documentary about a heavy-metal band. But this film is about a *failed* heavy-metal band, which sounds about as purposeful as a vegan shark. Back in the nineteen-eighties, Anvil was, if not huge, on the verge of hugeness. It was never, according to the movie, one of the Big Four—a term that I always associated with the Paris peace conference of 1919, but which, on further inspection, turns out to refer to Anthrax, Metallica, Megadeth, and Slayer. (Specialists might prefer to file them under thrash metal, that delicate subset of the genre, but "Anvil!" is wise enough to steer clear of such hairsplitting, not least because, in a world where most of the guitarists look like exploded spaniels, there is an awful lot of hair to split.) Still, Anvil had its adherents, and we find a swarm of them in a clip of the Super Rock Festival of 1984, in Japan, where the band's lead singer, Steve Kudlow, can be seen onstage playing his guitar with a sex toy, thus raising the question of whether he takes his plectrum to bed.

Kudlow is seldom known as Steve. To his friends and admirers, for visible reasons, he is Lips. In 1973, in Toronto, he met a fellow-local named Robb Reiner, a drummer by vocation—and no relation to the Rob Reiner who directed "This Is Spinal Tap," the great mock documentary about heavy metal, though both bands would relish the freak coincidence. The decision that Lips and Robb reached as teen-agers, to rock together, is one that they have stuck to for thirty-six years. That symbiosis has come to fuse the pair so unbreakably that, at some points in the documentary, you can scarcely tell them apart—never more so than when they bicker, which is half the time. "Why am I your fall guy, constant-fuckingly?" a plaintive Reiner asks, amid the angry fallout of a recording session. "Because I love you," Lips replies, quite without embarrassment or doubt. I have noticed something similar in the bond between Francis Rossi and Rick Parfitt, of the British group Status Quo, and we should celebrate the way in which pairs of aging rockers tend to wind up like lovely, crumbling old married couples, with each one finishing the other's sentences and pining when he has to go away.

"Anvil!" gets going in the present day, with the band half-forgotten, and Lips on the skids. We watch him delivering prepared meals to schools in Scarborough, Ontario, driving along snowy roads and musing on shepherd's pie and meat loaf. At one point, he wears a food worker's hairnet, thereby morphing into a dead ringer for Mickey Rourke in "The Wrestler." Reiner, meanwhile, has some sort of demolition job, which at least allows him to use a power drill—a short hop, surely, from the task of hammering out the beat in "Metal on Metal," still the band's signature song. Even here, though, the men's ponderings have a sublime tone—a muted chord of resignation and expectancy that immediately puts you on their side. "After all's said and done, I can say that all has been said and done," Lips remarks, sounding like a bankrupt in Dickens or a derelict in Beckett. (The film's director, Sacha Gervasi, went from being a roadie for Anvil, in the eighties—the musicians called him Teabag, because he's English—to working on an archive of Samuel Beckett material, so this film may represent an unrepeatable chance to merge his interests.) Many such gems fall from the mouth of Lips; after everything on tour goes "drastically wrong," he gently points out that "at least there was a tour for it to go wrong *on*." How can you not love a man who thinks like that, dredging the television of consolation from the swimming pool of disaster?



Robb Reiner and Steve Kudlow, of the Canadian heavy-metal band Anvil.

In tune with this tiny hint of optimism, Gervasi uses his film to trace the recrudescence of Anvil. Progress is bumpy at best. Early on, we watch the band gather for Lips's birthday, with the words "Happy Fucking 50" prettily inscribed in red icing on the cake, and a couple of long-term fans, Cut Loose and Mad Dog, all too welcome to join in. Out of nowhere, a European tour is arranged, and Anvil finds itself pounding away in a half-empty bar in Munich,

ANDY FRIEDMAN

with one loyal customer seated on an easy chair, headbanging all by himself. Nothing could be sadder than that, although Lips comes close when he exclaims, as the light fades at a Swedish outdoor festival, "Well, here we are backstage, trying to talk to Ted Nugent." With all respect, that's not the *highest* of human ambitions, is it? Spirits are raised by the sight of a Romanian venue with a capacity of ten thousand, and by rumors that "the mayor of Transylvania" himself may attend—a charming touch, in the gore-friendly world of thrash. In the event, the audience totals a hundred and seventy-four. The tour is organized, more or less, by a diehard Anvilista named Tiziana, who is incapable of booking train tickets, although her follow-up phone calls have the authentic tang of rock chick (" 'A' like 'ass,' 'S' like 'Sodom' "), and she, too, salvages something at the last minute by unexpectedly marrying the lead guitarist, Ivan Hurd.

Back comes Anvil, to the small comforts of home, and to a few more snippets of information, carefully staggered by Gervasi, about what that home consists of. I was unshaken by the news that Lips has a mother named Toby, and Robb has a sister named Droid, but the sequence in which Lips's sister Rhonda lends him more than twelve thousand dollars to cut a new album ("He's my dear brother and I've always loved him") yields the shock that you get only from unvarnished goodness. We are shown a photograph of the infant Reiner with his father, a survivor of Auschwitz, and if, like me, you have been shamefully ignorant of Jewish Canadian heavy metal and its family background, here is your chance to atone. No wonder that Lips stumbles so badly when Cut Loose, the fan from the birthday bash, finds him a job in telephone sales. "I've been trained my whole life to be polite," Lips says, and he duly fails to close a single deal. No wonder, too, that, as he mails off a tape of new songs to a former producer, solemnly licking the stamp, you fear the worst.

On the other hand, in the undying words of Lips, "It could never be worse than what it already is." Maybe the worst is already over, and, if you've gone from performing in Japanese stadiums to playing badminton in the back yard, as Lips does, with a crowd consisting of one dog, so what? There are worse ways to live. Thus it is that, in the final leg of the film, Anvil, buoyed by a positive response to the Rhonda-sponsored album, heads back to Japan and to a hall that can hold twenty thousand souls. Is this the fillip in fortune of which the band has dreamed, or are we heading for another Transylvania? Will twenty thousand Japanese youngsters bother to have their eardrums pummelled at eleven-thirty-five in the morning—hardly the slot of a headline act—or will all but two dozen choose to stay in bed? I genuinely didn't know the answer, and somehow it mattered very much; ninety minutes before, I had never heard of Anvil, yet now the question of the band's fate held me in its grasp, and I could sense the people around me, likewise, holding their breath. If we were watching a Hollywood drama, of course, the hall would erupt; but this was a documentary, and anyone versed in "Hoop Dreams" knows that sometimes it is the regrettable duty of nonfiction to dash the kinds of sweet resolution in which Hollywood likes to traffic.

What actually happens I have no intention of revealing. Suffice it to say that the emotion that swept the cinema, at the climax, seemed unanimous, binding, and true: pretty much all that we ask of a movie, when you think about it. People who wait for the DVD, on the ground that this is a documentary about losers, made by a Brit, will miss out on that wonderful sense of conspiracy you get only in a cinema, with a bunch of complete strangers joined in a secret pact. Presumably, that is how Anvil aficionados feel, too, when they listen to songs like "March of the Crabs," "Dr. Kevorkian," and "Bushpig." I had expected "Anvil! The Story of Anvil" to be no more than a real-life rehash of "This Is Spinal Tap," and the very title of the new film has the same nudge of comic overkill that we treasure in the earlier one, whose famous scene of a guitar amp being turned up to eleven is echoed here. Some of Anvil's lines could have been lifted straight from the mouths of Spinal Tap, and, as for the announcement, in the end credits, that the hapless Tiziana is "hoping to branch out into opera," you couldn't make it up. Yet, despite all that, Gervasi adds something that goes beyond Rob Reiner's brief, and that no amount of mockery can tame. This film is not about rock music at all, still less about school lunches in Ontario, or unusual uses for vibrators; it is about time, and how it threatens to fade us out like a song on the radio, and why, risking ridicule, and leaning on love, we should crank up the volume and keep going. Whatever Lips maintains, not all has been said and done. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

The Front Row, a blog about movies.

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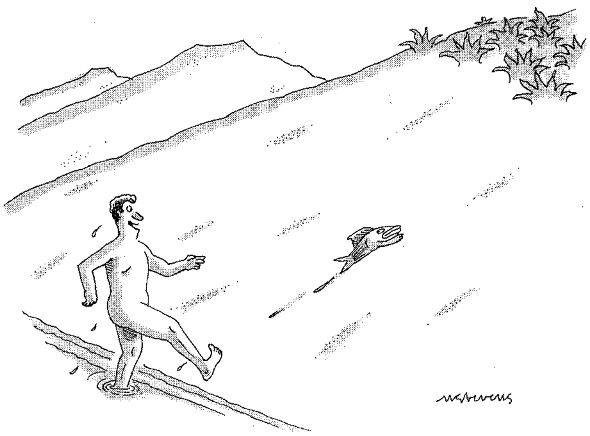
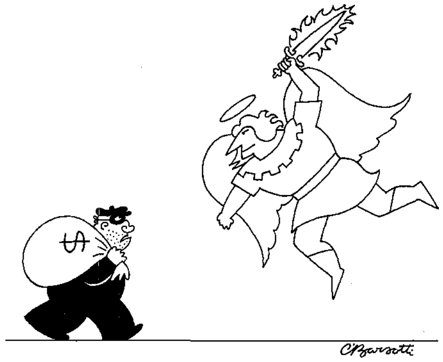
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, April 19th. Finalists in the April 6th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 4th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"You're in trouble when we get to the bicycles."
John Kinde, Las Vegas, Nev.



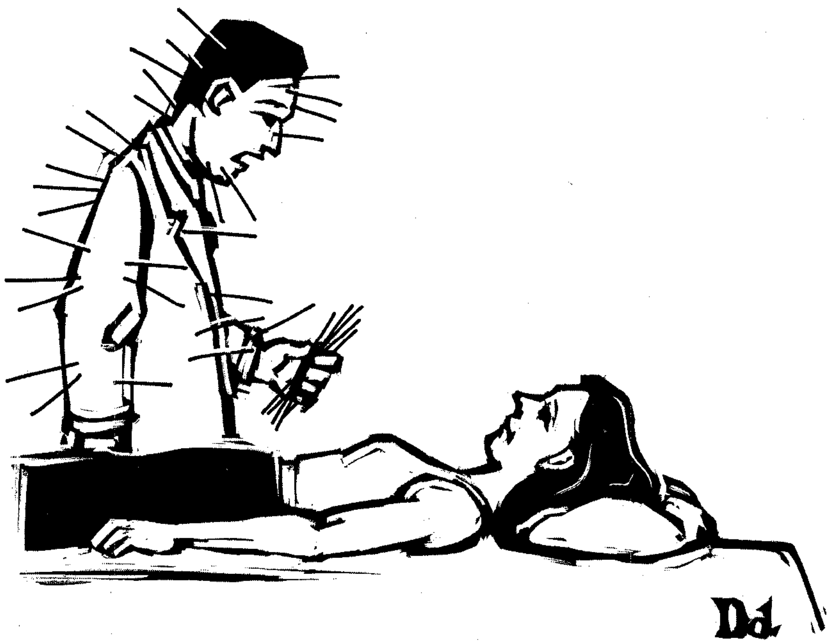
THE FINALISTS

"Trust me—you don't want this. It's filled with mortgage-backed securities."
Christine Tai, New York City

"Haven't you got some white-collar criminals to attend to?"
James Bell, Charlottesville, Va.

"That skirt is so last year."
Kate Rounds, Jersey City, N.J.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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– *Los Angeles Times*, December 2008

"The 2010 Fusion is the best gasoline-electric hybrid yet."
– *USA TODAY*, February 2009

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– *Car and Driver*, February 2009

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